MARDEE GRAY'S CHOICE

DOROTHY JARNAGIN

Cora B. Sam
Mt. pleasant - Mich

CORA B. LATE

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When the girls became aware of their danger the train was almost on them. FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 177.

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BY

DOROTHY JARNAGIN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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To

THE MEMORY OF

DOCTOR JAMES DOUGLAS BRUCE

WHOSE TEACHING WAS AN INSPIRATION, THIS
LITTLE VOLUME IS DEDICATED

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MARDEE GRAY'S CHOICE

CHAPTER I

MARDEE'S HOME

"THERE now, Mardee — only two more buttonholes and it will be done!"

Mrs. Gray briskly snapped off a thread as she spoke, and firmly thumbed a finished buttonhole on her white-aproned knee.

Marjorie, sitting beside her on the old-fashioned sofa in the dining-room bay window, gave a little bounce of excitement and exclaimed for the fortieth time:

"Oh, Mother, it's perfectly scrumbunctious!" She was holding spread out on her lap the ruffled skirt of the white organdie dress her mother was making, and she patted it at frequent intervals with rapturous little pats. "I know it will be the very darlingest dress at the party to-night."

"Pshaw! I bet Marilyn Gibson's dress will be a ready-made one out of her father's store, or else made by a real dressmaker," remarked Barbara, Marjorie's sister. She was stretched out on the floor by the door to the side porch with her arms around an Airedale terrier.

"Don't move. We're so comfortable. What's the use of talking?" put in Seldom Fed, the dog.

At any rate, he half opened his eyes and uttered sundry guttural sounds which expressed those ideas.

"See here, Bab Gray," laughed her mother, biting off a new thread, "I want to know if I haven't made enough dresses for you two girls to have graduated yet into the 'real dressmaker' class?"

"I think a certain person is jealous because she is not in the high school and not invited to the reception for new students," Marjorie confided in a teasing aside to her mother.

"Or maybe a certain person is inclined to be critical because nobody has made a new dress for her, or bought her new slippers and a fan," Mrs. Gray replied in a laughing stage whisper. "Never mind, Bab, old girl," she added in the younger daughter's direction, "next year you will be a high-school Freshman, and then you will be invited to the faculty reception for new students and Mother will make you a new dress to wear."

"And then you'll think Mother sews as well as Miss Parthenia Schmedley herself," Marjorie finished in triumph.

"Mother sews all right. I just meant — well, you said it would be the darlingest dress at the party, and Marilyn is ever so much richer than we are," explained Barbara in an apologetic tone.

"Ain't it 'bout time to set de suppah table, Miss Lizzie?" a new voice interrupted the conversation, and the door to the back hall opened wide enough to admit a kinky black head. "Law-dee, Miss Mardee — " and the door was flung

wide enough to reveal two upraised yellow palms —"ain't dat de purtiest thing!"

"It's perfectly scrumbunctious, isn't it, Lighty?" agreed Mardee, her forty-first repetition. "And you ought to see the slippers and the fan that go with it. Just you wait!"

She arose with caution and spread the ruffly billows on the sofa where she had sat, and then disappeared in the direction of the hall and the stairway, whence she presently emerged out of breath, bearing in one hand a pair of white kid slippers, in the other a feather fan at full mast, and dangling limply from one arm a pair of white silk stockings.

Lighty, who had crossed the room and raised one fold of the organdie between a humbly admiring thumb and forefinger, again threw up both hands and made three round o's of her eyes and mouth.

"Ain't — dey busters?" she demanded of an invisible world. She was a wiry chocolate brown girl with tightly plaited braids all over her long head and a keen roving eye. "An' won't — dem boys an' girls make a 'miration when you gits 'em on? Um-m-m-uh!"

"Those heels on the slippers are the very newest thing," Mardee explained in her rôle of exhibitor. She had set them down on the sofa at a proper distance from the bottom of the organdie and spread out the stockings along the space between. "They look like lace veils, don't they? The young lady who sold them to us said they were very stylish."

"Um-m-uh!" commented Lighty with an unction satisfactory enough to make up for any vagueness of diction.

"Yes, Lighty, I'd set the table now if I were you," Mrs. Gray answered her earlier remark. "Is the chipped beef creamed?"

"Yas-m."

"And were there enough of those apples for apple sauce?"

"Yas-m, Miss Lizzie, jes' 'bout 'nough."

"Are the biscuits all ready to go into the oven?"

"Yas-m, Miss Lizzie, eb'rything's ready."

"Well, I suppose the doctor will be here any minute now. Keep your fire hot for the biscuits."

While the negro girl took off the pot of flowers and brown runner and magazines which had transformed the dining table into a library table, and spread the cloth for supper, Mrs. Gray divided her attention between the buttonholes and the process of setting the table.

"Now the salt cellars," she reminded Lighty. "There is no glass at Doctor Gray's place. Don't forget the napkins. Done, Mardee!" she pronounced at last, thumbing the last buttonhole into shape and rising to shake out the completed garment with a flourish.

Mardee was Marjorie's baby name for herself, which had persisted and was almost invariably applied to her, as was the nickname of Bab to Barbara.

Mardee took the organdie frock out of her mother's hands and whirled around with it at arm's length.

"Just think, Bab — an evening dress!" she exclaimed.

"It's not really an evening dress. You can wear it in the daytime just as well. But it will do to wear in the evening," corrected Bab, thumping the sleeping Airdale affectionately in the side.

Seldom grunted without opening his eyes.

Bab's words came not from any desire to belittle her sister's possessions, but from a downrightness and honesty which could not admit of any misnomer. Mardee was a creature of poetry and imagination. In the excitement of any great moment, like the present, her fancy could take wings and everyday things could dress up for her in high-sounding titles. Not so, Bab. No rapture was so intense as to lift her steady little feet off the ground. To level-headed Barbara an organdie dress was an organdie dress and not an evening dress, even on the night of the high-school reception to new students.

"Well, anyway, that lace on it is perfectly lovely. And it has forty-'leven ruffles. And I'm going to wear it in the evening." Mardee could find some glamour, even in a summer afternoon dress. "Really, isn't it perfectly scrumbunctious?"

"Well — rather," admitted Bab. She sat up to get a better look at it and the pup transferred himself to a position more removed from her inconvenient restlessness.

"What's the matter with you? Stay over there. I can rest better when you're not bothering me,"

he remarked. At any rate so Bab interpreted his sleepy whimpers, for she replied:

"Oh, very well, if you have to be so disagreeable about it."

"Mother and I had such fun shopping for these slippers! Aren't they cunning?" proceeded Mardee.

"Well, I know I'm glad I don't have to bother keeping them clean. I'd rather have black ones myself," was prosaic Bab's reply.

"Oh, Bab, I just love them! They make my feet look so dressed up."

"Huh! Clothes are a lot of bother! But that's a peachy fan."

"You may carry it sometimes. All fluffy and feathery and softy." Mardee's fingers caressed it lightly.

"Mother must have spent a lot on all of this, didn't she, Mardee?"

"Oh, Bab, you know it isn't polite to discuss the price of things!" To airy, fairy Miss Mardee, alas, the price of any purchase was all too unimportant. But practical little Bab had become early imbued with the Grays' very urgent need of considering the cost.

"Well, she must have. If you were burned up to-night, Mardee, I expect the actual money loss would be nearly thirty dollars."

Mardee laughed,—a happy laugh, partly of amusement at Bab's concern for the family pocketbook in case of accident to her sister, and partly of pure elation and anticipation. She spread the dress out on the sofa again as gently as if it had

been some beloved invalid and arranged the shoes and stockings and fan in what appeared to her the proper places.

Mrs. Gray came bustling in from the kitchen. She was a plump and cheery body, always ready with a laugh and radiating an atmosphere of hominess. In her wake followed Lighty, bearing the chipped beef and hot biscuits.

"Come on, chickens. Everything is ready now." Mrs. Gray untied her apron strings as she delivered this invitation and threw the apron over Lighty's arm. "I hope Daddy won't be very late." Doctor Gray was a practicing physician and his wife was accustomed to his irregularity at meals. "Perhaps you had better light the gas before we sit down, Lighty. These September days seem very short."

The house had been built before the days of electricity and had never been wired. High over the table was a chandelier holding two gas jets, one of which Lighty reached by means of a long gas-lighter holding a taper.

Seldom Fed, meanwhile, had advanced several paces nearer the table and assumed a waiting position on his haunches, his nose twitching insinuatingly, his stub of a tail rubbing hopefully from side to side.

Lighty departed to the kitchen and Mrs. Gray and the girls had hardly drawn their chairs up to the table when there was a stamping on the back porch, the usual sign that Doctor Gray, having come in through the driveway and the garage in the back yard, was wiping his feet be-

fore entering the house. Then the kitchen door opened, his salutation to Lighty could be heard, and in a moment he appeared in the dining-room, — a tall, thin, gray-haired man twenty years older than his wife, with a white mustache and tender, whimsical eyes.

"Oh, there's the master! There's the master!" the Airedale had announced in joyous wiggles at the first sound of his footsteps, and before the door opened he was waiting with an impatient paw clawing at the crack.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you! We're all so glad you're back!" his doggish welcome declared, in a frenzy of curveting and leaping the moment the door was opened.

"Nice Seldom! Good old Seldom!" Doctor Gray greeted him, patting his wiry brown head with smiling affection. "Seldom" had been honored at baptism — or whatever takes the place of that ceremony among dogs of good breeding — with the more dignified appellation of Prince Chap, but the nickname of Seldom Fed, applied during his voracious and emaciated puppyhood, had clung to him ever since.

"Now, Seldom, down! — First kiss to Mother," Doctor Gray proceeded, bending over his wife. "Now, Rose Red and Snow White." The two girls answered in general to the description of those two heroines of fairy lore, Mardee all pink and white and golden, with a Dresden china daintiness, her bobbed hair making a shining halo about her face; Bab sturdier, plumper, less ethereal, her brown hair, which she had refused

to sacrifice to the barber's shears, braided Dutch fashion in two plaits. Bab had her mother's four-square wholesomeness, Mardee her father's poetic grace. Doctor Gray kissed both girls before he sat down in the armchair at the head of the table.

"Will you have to go out again to-night?" asked Mrs. Gray.

"Not unless I get a call over the telephone. You and I can beat Mother and Mardee at parchesi, Bab. How about it?"

"Oh, Daddy, did you forget that I was going to a party?" bridled Mardee with playful dignity. Her manner said that men were careless, blundering things to let such important matters slip their minds.

"I thought perhaps you could take Mardee in the automobile if you were going out," Mrs. Gray explained. "The party is at Miss Rhinebeck's, and Don Willis has asked to go with Mardee, but I didn't like to think of our little next-door neighbor in the light of an escort quite yet." She smiled with a mixture of mischief and tenderness in her elder daughter's direction as she spoke.

Doctor Gray had been looking at Mardee with a wistful intentness from the moment she had accused him. There was something about her to-night he did not seem to have noticed before: a more delicate pink in her cheeks, perhaps — like the blush of a wild rose, he thought to himself — a starry light in her eyes, a dreaming droop to her lashes, a misty shimmer in the soft cloud of hair that shadowed her brow.

"Mother forgets that I am a high-school girl now," she was pretending to pout.

Suddenly Doctor Gray sighed.

"Tired, dear?" Mrs. Gray asked.

"No; I've lost one of my babies. Mardee here is grown up all of a sudden. Mind you don't think you can shake off your old daddy, young miss! Indeed I will take you to Miss Rhinebeck's to-night. We'll take along that young squirt of a Willis, who thinks he can beau you around, if he wants to go with us. And I'll beat Bab at crokinole when I come home. No young knights hanging around trying to carry you off to parties, are there, little one?"

Bab's reply was to go around behind her father's chair and rumple his gray hair indignantly,— an irregular proceeding not altogether unheard of before in the somewhat informal Gray household.

Lighty's arrival in the midst of this demonstration saved Doctor Gray from a punishment more severe.

"Lighty, what is the fastest thing you know?" inquired Mardee.

Lighty showed a row of white teeth and rolled her eyes in a grin. She was one of a family of negroes who had belonged to the Grays "befo' de wah", and she had worked for the doctor's family since she was a little skinny-legged, wild-eyed pickaninny, first as assistant to "Aunt Panky", as her mother was called in the household, before Aunt Panky's rheumatism had prevented her from acting as cook any longer. She

was used to the ways of the girls. Lighty's real name was Luvertis. Aunt Panky had called her Lighty in her childhood because she was so quick and light on her feet, and had selected her as an assistant from her plentiful brood because of that quality.

"Fire injun, I reckon, Miss Mardee. How come you ask?"

"Because I want you to get this table cleared off faster than a fire engine, then. I want to get through and dress," Mardee replied. It was the task of the two girls to help Lighty with the work in the evenings so she could get off as early as possible.

"Lawdee, Miss Mardee," was all Lighty would commit herself to, but the three threw themselves into their labors with such energy that it seemed as if magic must have cleared the table and adorned it with the brown runner and pot of flowers and the reading lamp beside which Doctor Gray read and Mrs. Gray sewed and the girls studied their lessons in the evenings. It must have been magic, too, that kept the dishes from being smashed to bits by the mad haste with which they were stacked up and washed.

"Where do I come in?" asked Seldom's anxious brown eyes, roving nervously from one flying plate-bearer to another.

"Here, Seldom! Here, Seldom!" Bab invited him briskly, when the scraping was all done and the choicest morsels saved for him. The two whisked out of the back door simultaneously and his supper was hastily deposited on the tin

plate under the tree which constituted his dining-room canopy.

In half the usual time Lighty with her "pan" — that institution by means of which the negroes are fed out of the white folks' back doors — had departed.

"Now, Mother dear, I can't seem to feel any interest in the affairs of the vicar's family to-night. My own are so much more absorbing. Mayn't we read two chapters to-morrow night instead?" Mardee begged, when she had returned to the dining-room. This was a reference to "The Vicar of Wakefield", which Mrs. Gray was reading aloud. She read a chapter a night, before the girls began their lessons.

"Run along! Both of you! Shoo!" Mrs. Gray waved both hands at them, laughing, and Mardee, gathering up in her arms the precious finery on the dining-room sofa, sped joyously up the stairs to her room, followed hotfoot by Bab.

The Grays' home was an old-fashioned one with a narrow front hall at one side of the house, a steep flight of stairs ending in a still narrower upper hall beside the door into the front bedroom shared by the two girls. This was a simple room with matting on the floor, muslin sash curtains at the windows, and a plain cherry set of furniture.

"You light the gas, please, Bab, and then lend a hand here, won't you?" said Mardee.

"Yes, your ladyship," replied Bab in a respectfully menial tone.

She lighted the gas in the two bracket jets on either side of the bureau mirror, and Mardee deposited her burden on the bed.

The color was mounting in her cheeks and her eyes were shining with pleasure. Mardee's chief beauty had always been the delicate color which came and went in her clear fair skin. When she was happy it showed in the flush of her cheeks; any animation brought a blush; and under excitement she fairly glowed. No débutante adorning herself for her coming-out party ever took more pains with her toilet than did Mardee dressing for her first high school reception, and no court beauty in her silken boudoir ever met a sweeter image in her glass than did she when she dimpled and glowed at her reflection. Bab made a willing lady's maid and Mrs. Gray came upstairs to give the last experienced touches.

"Now give me my fan," demanded Mardee, whirling around on her little white kid toes when she was sartorially complete.

"Yes, your ladyship. Anything else, your ladyship?" Bab replied.

Mardee tossed back her fluffy mane and turning her profile, with feather fan extended for a background, struck a theatrical pose.

"How's that for Irene Castle?" she asked, with lifted eyebrows and an affected shrug.

"Don't put on such airs when you get to the party," advised Bab with little-sisterly disapproval.

"I don't call that putting on airs," retorted Mardee.

"What else is it? You're not acting like yourself," Bab insisted.

"I'm acting like one of my selves. When I'm wiping dishes or studying lessons I'm one me, and when I'm dressed up like this for a party I'm another me. The dish-wiping, studious me doesn't act that way naturally, but the other me does."

"Then the other you is a silly you," pronounced Bab witheringly, as she followed her to the top of the stairs.

"I'm ready, Daddy dear," Mardee announced, dropping a sweeping curtsey outside the dining-room door just at the foot of the stairs.

"Goodness me!
I never did see
Such a pretty girlee
As my Mardee!"

rhymed Doctor Gray, laying down his newspaper and rising to return her obeisance with a stately bow.

Mardee raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips and twisted one shoulder in sinuous nonchalance, but Bab on the stairs burst out with a demand for her father's confirmation of her protest.

"Daddy, she's an affected goose, isn't she?"

Mardee laid her own case before the judge.

"It's not affectation if it's the way I feel, is it? I told Bab there were two me's. It would be affectation for the stay-at-home me, but it is natural for the butterfly, have-a-good-time me to act that way."

Doctor Gray gathered both his argumentative daughters to him, one on each side, and emphasized his judicial opinion with an affectionate squeeze, first with one arm and then with the other.

"Bab, I'm afraid she's getting pretty. I began to notice it at supper. And when they do that, they're very apt to lose their heads. But, Mardee, you're more than pretty. You have a mind, too. Take care that you don't let it go to waste."

"You're a precious, flattering old Daddy," Mardee smiled up at him and gave his arm an answering squeeze.

"No, not flattering. Mardee, do you remember the fable of the grasshopper and the ant? How the grasshopper danced in the sun all summer long, while the ant worked and stored up food for the winter? You have the two characters of that fable within yourself. The two you's you spoke of were Mardee Grasshopper and Mardee Ant. The light-headed, pleasure-loving Mardee is Mardee Grasshopper; the sensible little stay-at-home Mardee who helps about the house and loves her studies is Mardee Ant. But one of those Mardees is going to develop at the expense of the other. There will be a struggle between them. If Mardee Grasshopper wastes the summer of her youth dancing in the sunshine of parties and pretty clothes she won't have anything else when winter comes. And if Mardee Ant lays up a love of good books and an ability to enjoy quiet hours, she will have something to feed upon when her pink cheeks have faded and griefs and responsibilities have

begun to come. I believe I agree with Bab here that we had better help Mardee Ant win the struggle."

"We'll have an awfully hard time," sighed Mardee honestly.

But Doctor Gray smiled. "I don't think so. All we have to do is to give her a chance. Now run out on the porch and wait until I get the car started. I telephoned Don to be ready when he heard the engine and we'd take him to the party."

Mardee kissed her mother, patted Seldom's head, and went out on the front porch. In a little while the chug-chug of the automobile in the garage brought Don Willis out of his front door and across the lawn between the two houses, and when Doctor Gray came down the driveway the boy and girl came out together to get into the car.

CHAPTER II

MARDEE'S FRIENDS

Don was a tousled-headed, freckled-faced boy, not unlike Seldom Fed in his general characteristics, who had grown up with the two Gray girls under conditions which made him seem more like a brother, or at any rate a very near cousin, than just a friend. The two families had been next-door neighbors since the children were babies and had maintained the friendliest relations. Don and Mardee had started to school on the same day, and having gone through every grade of the grammar school in the same room, had arrived now at the dignity of high school students together.

"It will be a mighty big party," said Mardee. "There are so many students in the high school."

"I guess it's a big party every year," replied Don. "That's why they have it at Miss Rhinebeck's house. She is the only one in the faculty whose home is large enough to entertain the whole crowd in."

"I can remember when the old Rhinebeck place was away out in the country," Doctor Gray remarked. "It has always been one of the finest old places in Channingsburg. Susie Rhinebeck was just a little girl in those days, and Allie Herrington was one of her playmates."

"Miss Herrington?" exclaimed Don.

"That cross old thing?" echoed Mardee. "I can't think of her ever having been young or playing with anybody, can you, Don? She scares me to death."

"I'm afraid she'll scare all the math out of our heads instead of hammering it in," Don agreed.

"But Miss Rhinebeck's a love. I'm sure I'd like her classes even if English weren't my favorite study."

"She's a rip-snorter," agreed Don solemnly.

The lady thus highly spoken of welcomed the two at the door with a smile which expressed something more than hospitable courtesy when it rested on Mardee's eager little face, so alight with shy expectancy, and she stepped out on the porch to have a word with Doctor Gray, who had waited at the curbstone to watch until his little girl should have disappeared through the brightly lighted doorway.

"Won't you come in, Ned?" she asked.

"Not to-night, thanks. You'll look after my baby for me, won't you, Susie?"

"Ned," laughed Miss Rhinebeck, "one look at your baby convinced me that she won't need any looking after."

Mardee, meanwhile, had found Sally Cox and Beatrice Gorham upstairs in the dressing room, where she had gone to remove her light cape.

"The saints above be my witness if iver I laid eyes upon as swate a sight as yez be this night, darlin', darlin'!" exclaimed "Begorry", — a nickname for Beatrice Gorham evolved through the

intermediate stage of Bea Gorham and made doubly appropriate by her long upper lip and temperamental, affectionate nature. Begorry, having accepted the rôle thrust upon her by reason of her nickname and appearance, was given to couching her remarks in a picturesque brogue. "It's the prettiest gur-r-rl at the party yez are, whativer," she wound up.

"That's a p d y h o," was Sally's cryptic greeting.

"That's a what? Sally, I'm much too flustered by Begorry's remarks to be able to piece together your meaning. What's a p d y h o?"

"That's a p d you have on," Sally half translated.

"Well, I have on a dress, so it must be a p dress, then. Did you mean a pretty dress? Because if you did, thank you. Though p might stand for pink, which it isn't, or purple, or prudish, or piggish — "

"You guessed it right the first time. It's a beauty, Mard, and you look grand in it. It's a p d and y l g in it."

"You look grand in it," sang out Begorry promptly.

"Why, just listen to Begorry! Who'd 'a' thought it?" teased Sally.

Both Mardee and Begorry were familiar with Sally's conversational vagaries. She was the wag of her class — the clown, she called it herself — the originator of all their schoolgirl slang and the one who was most frequently quoted for her original sayings. No one could tell from day to

day whether she would discourse in Dog Latin, the deaf and dumb language, or the initials of the words in her sentences. And as she was a clever mimic and a great bookworm besides, her friends were often obliged to translate her remarks from Biblical or Shakespearian English into the idiom of the day. Begorry was the special butt of all her jokes. The two were devoted chums and a perfect foil to each other,— Sally, brown-skinned, snappy-eyed, with a figure her friends did not hesitate to call "skinny" and a face which would have been homely had it not been for its alertness; Begorry, on the other hand, dumpy and fat and slow-witted, with a turned-up nose and a good-natured docility of expression.

"Oh, I'm frightened at the thought of going down there into the midst of all those people. I wish we could stay up here in the dressing room," said Begorry, shrinking back as the other two made a move to go.

"Then what would be the use of Mardee's p d? That would be hiding it under a bushel!" Sally reproved her jokingly.

"Honestly, I'm not joking. You two may not be frightened, but just feel my hands;" and Begorry held out two cold and clammy extremities.

"You won't mind it so much when you get downstairs," Mardee comforted her. "Miss Rhinebeck will see that we Freshmen are introduced to all the upper classmen."

"Yes, cheer up, mavourneen, the worst is yet to come," laughed Sally impishly. "She'll turn you over to a committee from the Middle and

Senior classes to stand you up and fire the names of everybody at you."

The Channingsburg High School was divided into three classes, Freshman, Middle and Senior, and this first party of the year was for the purpose of making the incoming class acquainted among themselves and with those who had been there before. It was no wonder that Mardee and Sally and Begorry, who had been to the same grammar school and had been friends all the way through, should feel shyly inclined to cling to one another among so many strangers gathered together from every quarter of the city, but Begorry was the only one who really dreaded going downstairs again into the crowded hall. Sally had a venturesome spirit that welcomed any novelty, and Mardee's attention was distracted by seeing Don Willis and Branch St. John waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

Branch St. John was Don Willis's chum, a boy who, perhaps by reason of the absence of freckles and the smoothness of his hair, seemed much older than Don, and whom Mardee had always found interesting. He was a slender, quiet, studious lad with fine, frank blue eyes and a noble brow. He and his mother, the widow of a naval officer, lived with his mother's father, a Doctor Branch, who had been for half a century the well-beloved pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Channingsburg; but before his father's death Branch had traveled all over the world and Mardee fancied that it was his unusual amount of experience of places and people that had made him seem differ-

ent from the other boys. She had seen a good deal of him at Don's and had taken an intelligent interest in his stamp collections and favorite books, which had won his grave respect.

"Mardee, Branch has been looking for you," said Don, when she reached the foot of the stairs.

"I want you to be nice to a fellow for me to-night, Mardee," amended Branch.

"Why, of course I'll be nice to any friend of yours, Branch. Who is it?" Mardee asked.

"You'd be nice to anybody," smiled Branch. "But this is sort of special. It's a fellow named Roscoe Lawhead. Grandfather knows his family. They live out on Crow's Nest Mountain and are such poor people that Roscoe has had to work to help support his brothers and sisters ever since his father died five or six years ago, and he is a lot older than most of the rest of the high school students. He didn't want to come to this party to-night — said he entered the school to work, not to play — I think he has an idea he is different from the rest of us and you girls won't care about talking to him. I persuaded him to come and I want you to help me make him have a good time — make him feel at home, you know, and all of that. I told him I was going to introduce him to a girl that would be glad to talk to him about books, and that I knew he'd like. I felt sure I could count on you, Mardee."

"Of course you can, Branch."

"He hasn't come yet. I'll bring him to you when he does."

The latter part of their conversation had been

hurried by the approach of Miss Rhinebeck with the very evident intention of carrying Mardee off.

"Mardee, this is Lutie Kent, one of the Senior girls, who will see that you get acquainted," she said in her gracious way, and turned Mardee over to the Senior whose task it was to provide for her entertainment.

Lutie Kent's job was not a difficult one. In fact, the hardest part of it was getting a chance to introduce to her little charge all the Middle and Senior class students who flocked about her, asking to be presented to the glowing little Freshman with the animated manner.

"Miss Kent, who is the little girl holding court in this corner?" Professor McKie asked Lutie in a whisper. Professor McKie was the new Science teacher, a recent college graduate.

"Mardee Gray," whispered Lutie.

"You're managing a star, aren't you?" he laughed with another glance at Mardee.

Mardee had not forgotten her father's parting words, "No matter what the others do, don't forget that it will never go out of style for the children of well-bred families to be courteous and attentive to older people," and she watched her chance to slip away from her court and speak to the chaperones.

The high school teachers and some of their friends were collected at one end of the long double parlors, and Mardee shook hands with each one and stood chatting for a moment or two, with a mixture of bashfulness and cordiality that brought a welcoming smile into every pair of

eyes, from "Daddy" Wingfield's, the venerable principal's, to the blue orbs of Miss Hazelhurst, the young physical culture director.

Even stern Miss Herrington, the gaunt mathematics teacher and terror of the high school, held Mardee's hand between both of hers and said smilingly:

"Not all the boys and girls have been so nice to their elders as you. You may tell your mother and father that they can feel proud of their little daughter."

To her neighbor, when Mardee had passed on, she whispered:

"Ned Gray's little girl makes you think of a friendly, purring kitten."

Channingsburg, though now a city of a hundred thousand inhabitants, had done its growing very rapidly, and most of the older natives, who could remember the time when it was still a small town with all of the easy-going friendliness characteristic of the South, still called each other by their first names. "Ned" Gray, who had done many deeds of quiet charity, and the wife he had brought to the growing town in her radiant girlhood were well-beloved citizens. The esteem in which her parents were held went far to prejudice people in Mardee's favor. But that it was not only regard for her father and mother that made the teachers beam upon her, and not at all their reputation which attracted the glances of the younger generation, Mardee had a warm consciousness in her heart. The very apparent admiration in those glances went to her head like wine and still further

heightened the color in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes.

"Mardee, what's got into you to-night?" asked Marilyn Gibson, when in a crowd the two happened to be side by side. "I never saw you look so perfectly adorable."

"Methinketh Mistress Gibs is like to throw herself into the river from jealousy," commented Sally Cox, who had overheard. Marilyn was another of the little group of Mardee's intimates who had entered the high school together, and Sally's remark was inspired by the fact that Marilyn herself was unusually attractive in a dress which fulfilled all of Bab's prophecies with regard to it.

"I'd have a long walk to the river, Coxie dear. But I'll stick my head in the punch bowl if you say so," Marilyn retorted.

Mardee had been conscious for some time of the presence of a rosy-cheeked, light-haired, jolly-looking boy on the outskirts of the group surrounding her.

"Look here, Lutie Kent," he said, making his way to her side, "you are not doing your duty. I am told that Miss Rhinebeck entrusted this young lady to your care. You're supposed to be making her have a good time and you've failed to present Me to her. I consider that gross negligence."

"Don't you think I have done all I could for her entertainment if I haven't let her meet you, Tom?" Lutie laughed.

"I know you haven't."

"Then I'll hasten to rectify my error. Miss

Gray, this is Tom Adair, one of the brightest ornaments of the Senior class."

"At last!" sighed the pleasant-faced boy with dramatic satisfaction. "I've been trying to meet you since the moment I first caught sight of you. I've asked everybody in three rooms to introduce me, but one would have thought they were all set for pickets to guard you from the intrusion of strangers."

Mardee grabbed at her head with hands outstretched and pressed against it from both sides.

"I'm afraid it must be going to swell," she explained. "I'm not used to such overwhelming speeches."

CHAPTER III

MARDEE GRASSHOPPER

Until she was introduced to Tom Adair, Mardee had been on the lookout for Branch St. John and his protégé. She had not seen them but she had remembered Branch's request and kept herself in readiness to help him set that older and poorer boy at his ease. From the moment she met Tom Adair, however, all thoughts of Roscoe Lawhead were crowded out of her mind.

Wherever Tom was, the fun became fast and furious, and once Tom had attached himself to her train he became a permanent fixture.

"How about a game of charades?" he suggested in an invitation that included every one in the room.

"All right, Tom. You and Cliff Nash be the captains," another of the older boys answered, and Tom wasted no time in starting to choose his side.

"I'll choose Mardee Gray," he began.

The other captain chose and Tom chose again. Soon the ranks of both sides were filled. Across the hall Miss Rhinebeck started some other amusement and the double parlors were turned over to the actors of charades.

Tom's side had the first turn.

"Let's act 'painstaking'," suggested Lutie Kent. "Mardee Gray can go to the dentist to have a tooth pulled — "

"I'll be the dentist," volunteered Prince Stanley, another of the Senior boys Mardee had met for the first time that night.

"Oh, no, you won't, young man," Tom Adair contradicted him threateningly. "If this little lady's tooth is to be pulled no one is to be trusted with that job but me. I'll pull the tooth myself."

"We'll see who's the better dentist," replied Prince, pretending to roll up his sleeves, and Tom made a belligerent show of taking off his coat, but peacemakers stepped in between them and Prince gracefully withdrew in Tom's favor.

Each side had several turns and Mardee was not a character again until Tom Adair's side acted "Incomparable." Then they presented the first three syllables in one scene as "In come pair." A pair of Middle classmen went into the room beyond the double doors where the other team was gathered. The last two syllables were acted as one word, "able," by two boys, one, a big strong Senior, showing that he was "able" to hold a smaller one, a Freshman, at arm's length. When the whole word was to be shown Captain Tom said:

"Send Mardee Gray in."

Mardee held back and laughed a protest, but every one clapped and insisted upon her going, until she was forced to make her appearance in the other room, blushing and wearing a modest air of deprecation that won the hearts of her audience.

It was all a new experience, and thrilling and delightful. Sober little Mardee Ant, whom Branch St. John was counting on to talk about books to bashful Roscoe Lawhead had gone into a total eclipse. Her light had been extinguished by the brilliance of Mardee Grasshopper, and Mardee Grasshopper had completely forgotten the conversation with Branch at the foot of the stairs.

Branch had been on Cliff Nash's side during the charades, and therefore unable to have a word with Mardee, but after the game he found a chance to whisper in her ear:

"Roscoe Lawhead is in the other room now, herding by himself. I'm going to bring him up, if it will be all right."

Mardee nodded brightly, and just then Tom Adair appeared with Cliff Nash in his wake.

"This ugly mutt isn't such a tough guy as he looks, Miss Mardee," Tom gracefully introduced him. "You needn't be afraid of him. He's Cliff Nash, a running mate of mine, and I'll vouch for his harmless character."

"Why, really, you don't look so very bad," laughed Mardee.

"Thank you for them woids, kind lady," said her new friend, a lean dark boy with a prominent nose. "You'll soon come to feel that the only thing against me is that I was first introduced to you by this cherub-faced deceiver. But, believe me, I have strength of character enough to resist contamination from associating with him."

Mardee looked from one to the other in mock despair. She was enjoying the sparring match

between them and had just declared derisively, "You two seem awfully fond of each other," when Branch St. John returned, bringing with him a long-legged boy with a shock of home-cut hair and big hands dangling too far out of his coat sleeves.

"Miss Gray, this is Mr. Lawhead," said Branch with a fine courtesy which implied that Mardee was being honored as much as Roscoe by the introduction.

Alas for the Mardee Ant whom he had confidently expected to find ready to assist him in his kindly undertaking! Alas that Mardee Grasshopper had been called into being by the two entertaining Seniors who were flattering her with their attentions!

"I am glad to meet you," said Mardee, giving the lanky mountaineer an impersonally cordial hand, and then turning to answer a remark which Cliff Nash had addressed to her on the other side.

"Oh, really, are they dancing in the other room? Yes, I'd love to dance."

She had politeness enough to include Branch and his friend in her party.

"Mr. Lawhead, I hope you dance, too? Won't you and Branch come with us across the hall?"

She could see the look of disappointment in Branch's eyes as Roscoe, of course, declined, but she loved dancing and was so surprised and delighted to find how much better she could dance with these older boys than with the other beginners like herself in her dancing class, who had hitherto made up the list of her partners, that she

put Branch's troubles out of her mind. She was so evidently enjoying herself that her high spirits spread like a contagion and brought her smiles and compliments, which in turn had the effect of making her happier and prettier than ever.

"I know who is the belle of the ball," whispered Tom Adair mysteriously.

"No, you boys are all only flattering me," Mardee accused him, laughing happily. "You have given me compliments on everything, and now even my dancing, which I know is horrible — but I suppose boys will be boys."

Mardee had reached that delicious stage of her development, as her father had so suddenly discovered at supper, which corresponds to the budding of a flower. She had passed, almost overnight, from childhood into girlhood, that little hour stolen for us mortals from fairyland, the unconscious possessor of which holds an irresistible charm for everybody with whom she comes in contact.

Perhaps it was asking too much of one suddenly blessed with so much power to expect her to use it wisely, but there was one person who expected no less, and like the fine, honorable gentleman he was he carried his complaint, not to any outsider, but straight to Mardee herself.

Branch St. John did not have an opportunity to speak to Mardee alone after she had treated Roscoe Lawhead so coolly until late in the evening when the refreshments were served. He asked her to dance, but some one else broke in on him so soon that he did not have time for any conversa-

tion. He had the advantage, however, of being one of the first to discover it when the plates began coming in from the kitchen.

"Mardee, won't you eat your ice cream with me?" he asked her, appearing at her side with a plate in each hand just as the music stopped after a dance.

"Thank you, Branch," Mardee replied and followed him through the crowd. He went out of the front door and around the porch to the very darkest corner under the vines, where he found a place for them at the top of the steps leading down into the backyard.

"Now!" he said, drawing a long breath, "I don't believe any one can find you here and carry you off. I have been trying to talk to you all evening and couldn't get in a word for the Seniors around you. You certainly made a hit with them."

Mardee had to laugh at the tone of complaint in which he made this unwilling tribute.

"What's the matter? Didn't you like that?" she asked.

"Well, I couldn't help that, I guess — and you couldn't either — " this with a friendly smile which softened his next words — "but I didn't like your being so much nicer to those fellows that had plenty of friends already than you were to that boy I wanted you to talk to for me."

"Roscoe Lawhead!" exclaimed Mardee with compunction. She drew in her breath and caught her lip between her teeth. "Honestly, Branch, I forgot all about him. I meant to help you make

him have a good time — and then — I had such a good time myself I just forgot!"

"I know," Branch nodded slowly. "But I didn't think you would. You always seemed so — well, you didn't seem like other girls, you know. You read books that were worth while and you could talk about them as if you had so much sense that I thought maybe you could appreciate just how that big, gawky mountain boy felt about coming to-night and would know how to put him at his ease. I thought if you talked to him about books and the things in which he was on an equality with the rest of us, he would forget all about being older, and not so well dressed, and different in his manners."

"Oh, Branch, I am so sorry!" she cried contritely. "I do know how he felt. Is it too late for me to talk to him now?"

"Yes, he's gone home. And I don't think I'll ever get him to another party. It was all just as he thought it would be. You see, I had told him about you beforehand. I had told him you were different from the other girls and that he would like to meet you and that you would enjoy talking to him when you found out how much he had read and how ambitious he was. And he said you wouldn't — "

"Oh, Branch — "

"He said he didn't belong in any social gathering. He said he was going to school to learn, so he could amount to something some time, but that these young boys and girls wouldn't want to have to associate with an old countryman like him. I

made him come because I thought it would do him good — "

"And it was just fine of you to do it! I wish I did worth-while things like that — helping people who are not so well off as I am myself. I'm afraid I am not at all the sort of girl you thought I was."

"I think you're a pretty good sport not to get sore at me for calling you down like this. I'll admit I thought you gave Roscoe a pretty raw deal and I was disappointed and all that. I wasn't going to any one else about it — I made up my mind to tell you what I thought the first chance I had and get it out of my system, so I could keep my mouth shut after that, but I supposed of course you'd go up in the air and it would be all off between us. It shows what kind of a girl you are if you'll still be friends when I criticize you."

"Perhaps I'm the kind of a girl you thought I was some of the time, and am not the rest of the time. Daddy said to me to-night there were two Mardees, a Mardee Grasshopper and a Mardee Ant. Sometimes I am one and sometimes the other. It was Mardee Ant you liked and expected to help you with Roscoe Lawhead, and it was Mardee Grasshopper who snubbed him and disappointed you."

"I see — Mardee Grasshopper and Mardee Ant. It's the fable of the grasshopper and the ant, isn't it?"

"It was Mardee Grasshopper who hurt Roscoe Lawhead's feelings and Mardee Ant is going to make it up to him just as soon as she possibly can. You'll help her, won't you?" Mardee's eyes, as

"I see—Mardee Grasshopper and Mardee Ant." *Page* 34.

they looked at him out of the shadow of the vines, were perfectly sober and her voice was very much in earnest.

"I'll do anything Mardee Ant asks me to — or Mardee Grasshopper, either. I'm the sworn knight of both of them," Branch replied with an undertone of seriousness in his gallant nonsense.

"Better be Mardee Ant's knight. She needs you more," advised Mardee in a lighter tone.

"Mardee Grasshopper seems to have plenty of others," laughed Branch. "All right. Mardee Ant is my first choice anyhow, you know."

"I hear Daddy honking his horn out in front. He said he would be back for Don and me at half-past ten." Mardee rose and ended their conversation. She found Don waiting for her, and when she had bidden Miss Rhinebeck good night and answered the laughing farewells called out to her from the hall and the porch, as she came down the stairs from the dressing room, she got into the automobile in a rather thoughtful mood, torn between Mardee Grasshopper's blissful recollections and the remorse of Mardee Ant.

CHAPTER IV

THE S-B-DOUBLE-M'S

Bab was sound asleep when Mardee got into bed beside her, but long before breakfast time in the morning she rolled over and shook Mardee out of dreamless depths to hear all about the party.

Mardee came back to earth slowly, but once reminded of the night before she popped her eyes wide open and launched forth on a glowing description of the occasion for Bab's benefit.

"Oh, Bab, I had a glorious time!" she declared, stretching her arms up over her head with a delicious yawn. "Everybody said the nicest things about my dress, and the way I looked, and my dancing — "

"Humph!" Bab cut short these self-laudatory reminiscences with a contemptuous sniff. "And I suppose you prissed around and behaved in the disgusting way Daddy called your Mardee Grasshopper manner."

"Well, really, Mardee Grasshopper did get me into a peck of trouble," Mardee ruefully confessed. "I'd remember the party with a good deal more pleasure if Mardee Grasshopper hadn't been horribly rude to a poor boy who needed her friendship, and failed a good friend when he needed

her." She poured into Bab's ears the tale of Roscoe Lawhead and Branch St. John, and Bab, more sympathetic with a humble penitent than with a self-satisfied prig, offered what comfort she could.

"Never mind, Mardee, you can make up for it by being extra nice to him at school some time," she said.

"You may be sure I'll never miss a chance of showing him I'm sorry," Mardee declared. "I told Branch it was Mardee Grasshopper who snubbed him, but Mardee Ant would make it up to him."

"I told you I didn't like Mardee Grasshopper," Bab could not resist seizing the opportunity to remind her.

Mardee gave a lengthy account of the charades and the dancing and all the minor events of the evening, and Bab listened enthralled, and encouraged her with leading questions. It was Saturday morning and there was no need to get up early, so she had time for a full recital.

"It's grand to have somebody right here at home to tell things to, Bab," opined Mardee, curled up under the covers with her knees almost touching her chin. "Things are so much more interesting when you can tell them to somebody."

"Yes, they are," Bab agreed.

"Now there's Marilyn Gibson," mused Mardee, on the same train of thought; "her sister is so much older that she thinks Gibs is nothing but a kid; and Sally Cox's sister is only a baby; and Begorry hasn't any sisters. Of course Sally and Begorry can tell things to each other, living right

next door, but that isn't like eating three meals together every day and sleeping together at night. I am the only one of the girls who has a sister near enough her own age to appreciate what she has to tell."

"You're awfully lucky to have me," admitted Bab complacently.

Mardee gave one of the brown pigtails braided down her back a friendly pull for answer.

"And, do you know, Bab, I feel as if I were going to have so much to tell you from now on?"

The younger girl accepted this condescension without rancor. A year in the early teens makes a great difference in age and Mardee's fourteen years gave her affairs a distinct advantage in the eyes of both.

Bab had her own little group of intimates at school,— girls she had gone through kindergarten with, and the eight grades of grammar school. Bab was now in the eighth grade. The four girls Mardee had mentioned had been her own closest friends for years. Hardly a day passed that they did not drift together at the home of one or another. Their warm friendship had arisen partly from the fact that they lived in the same section of the city and so had attended the same grammar school and walked home together from school in the afternoons, and partly from the fact that they came from families of congenial tastes and similar standards. Now that they were in the high school among a larger number of girls than had ever been in their class before, they found that the ties of old association drew them more closely

together than ever, and they felt themselves as a sort of family circle in the midst of the high school community.

"I'm crazy to see the girls and talk over last night with them," yawned Mardee. "Come on, Bab, let's get up and get this room cleaned up so I can go over to Sally's before dinner."

On Saturdays the sisters were expected to give their room a thorough cleaning and were not allowed to go anywhere until that job was done.

But as it happened Mardee did not have to go away from home to talk about the party, for Sally and Marilyn and Begorry had each been seized with a similar craving, and all came to Mardee's to satisfy it.

Sally called her over the telephone before she had finished her cleaning.

"By my faith, Dame Mardee!" was her greeting to Mardee's "Hello."

"Goodness, Sally — that's a new one. What have you been reading now?" asked Mardee, familiar with Sally's general style of conversation and well aware that it was apt to be an echo of the work of literature freshest in her memory.

"The 'Boys' King Arthur', and it's great, Mard. You ought to read it," she stepped out of her character long enough to explain, but went on in the next breath:

"Ye were passing well beseen yestere'en, fair damsel. Truly methinks that mayhap divers men hold opinion that ye be the fairest and most gentlest lady living."

"How long did it take you to make all that up,

Lune?" demanded Mardee. Lune, short for Lunatic, was an affectionate nickname by which Sally was very often called. "And what does it mean?"

"Wit ye well, I could give ye tidings the most joyous, an ye list."

"Well, I list. What sort of tidings?"

"Tradelasts, fair damsel."

Mardee gave a little squeal of delight. Here was something she could understand well.

"Oh, Sally, we simply must get together! I can give you just dozens of tradelasts.—I was coming over there this morning to talk over the party with you and Begorry."

"Alas, fair demoiselle! I must needs fare to the marts in quest of merchandise for my lady mother ere midday."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about, and even if I read King Arthur I probably shouldn't know any more than I do now because I don't soak up books the way you do, but if you mean you have to go down town for your mother this morning, why can't you come over here and make candy this afternoon?"

"I ween — "

"Oh, shut up, Lune!" Mardee cut off the Arthurian flow of language with the rudeness of familiarity. "Will you, or will you not, in plain United States, come over and make candy this afternoon?"

"Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife? I wilt," mocked Sally.

"I'll telephone Marilyn, and you whistle for

Begorry as you come by, so we can all get together."

"All right," Sally agreed.

And soon after dinner she appeared with her faithful admirer and foil, Begorry. They were always together, and both showed to the best advantage as a pair, for Begorry cheerfully accepted the rôle of butt of Sally's jokes and Sally could introduce any nonsense with, "as I just laughed and told Begorry"—with the a in "laughed" very broad. In fact, this special phrase had become so familiar that any one of the four friends was likely to begin a certain type of sentence with it.

"I bet you can't spell elderblow tea with four letters," said Sally to Marilyn Gibson, who had come before her.

"Of course I can't, and neither can you," Marilyn came back.

"Oh, yes, I can. It's easy. Can't you, Mardee?"

"No," smiled Mardee, shaking her fluff of yellow hair.

"Is it possible? Am I the only one who can do it?" Sally's tone expressed horrified incredulity.

"No, faith, and you're not, because I can," declared Begorry.

"Oh, well, you don't count because I showed you, and anyway you spell elderberry tea with the same four letters. Listen, Marilyn and Mardee: l double-o t, elderblow tea. Now don't go and do what Begorry did. I carefully taught that to her and she went home and asked her father at

the dinner table if he could spell elder*berry* tea with four letters!" Sally's gesture expressed the hopelessness of Begorry's case.

"Begorry! Did you?" demanded Mardee, laughing.

"I did," confessed Begorry, "and couldn't imagine why it didn't sound right, as it had when Sally told it to me."

"What did your father say?" asked Marilyn.

"Fayther said, 'Ye bayn't no janius, bay yez, aroon?' or words to that effect," answered Begorry.

But Sally contradicted her.

"No, he didn't. He thought it was just too cute for anything. Everything his little girl does is all right. I wish I were an only child. In our house there are so many children that nobody has time to pay any attention to any of us."

"Poor Sally!" sympathized Marilyn. "Mardee, has Lighty sufficiently recovered from the shock of finding her kitchen the way we left it the last time we made candy to risk it again?"

Marilyn made a pretty picture. She was sitting on the front steps with a broad-brimmed hat flapping about her face and one arm thrown affectionately around Seldom Fed's neck. Seldom, meanwhile, quivering with humble gratitude, made repeated efforts to lick her face and remained undiscouraged by rebuffs. She was tall and graceful and would have been an exceedingly pretty girl had it not been for her complexion, for she had quantities of beautiful blonde hair and good features, but some illness had left her with a

scarred and thickened skin which was a terrible grief to her. Her mother, who had both taste and means, was clever at selecting clothes to accentuate her daughter's attractive features, and especially hats and veils calculated to conceal her glaring defect, but the girl's unhappy, discontented expression clearly indicated the effect her misfortune had had on her disposition.

"Oh, Lighty doesn't really mind dirt at heart. It's Mother who makes her clean up, anyway, and Mother's a good sport," laughed Mardee.

She opened the screen door as she spoke and the girls trooped through the hall into the big, light kitchen behind the dining-room.

"Me, too!" begged Seldom's bark, as the door swung shut before him.

"No, Seldom; stay outside; that's a good doggie. You'll spoil the party frisking about," Mardee apologized, and had no sooner reached the kitchen than he greeted her at the kitchen door with a pleading yap. But Mardee remained obdurate.

"Good morning, Merry Sunshine! Just look who's here!" was Sally's greeting to Lighty, just finishing the dinner dishes at the sink in the corner.

"Yes, Lawd. Here y' all come again," groaned Lighty, rolling her eyes expressively, "dirtyin' up every pot an' pan I got an' wastin' sugar an' milk all over my table!"

"Lighty, we'll promise to clean up this time," Mardee sought to propitiate her. "You're not going to be busy here this afternoon, are you?"

"Naw, Miss Mardee, I's goin' to de dentis' jes' as soon as I gits dese here towels wrung out; but if I fin' my kitchen lookin' like Gabriel done blowed his ho'n when I gits back, I'll sho ask yo' maw not to let y' all come in here no mo'."

The girls accepted this dictum in a spirit of good nature and all pitched in to help her finish her work and get off.

"Now, Marilyn, you grate the chocolate, and Sally get the milk and butter from the ice chest, while I measure out the sugar," directed Mardee, when Lighty had been packed off to the "dentis' " and the decks were cleared for action. She issued her commands like a general, for they had so often made fudge together and were so familiar with every step in the process that it did not in the least interfere with their real business of talking.

"Now, Sally, what's my tradelast?" Mardee demanded, when the necessary preliminaries were over. Mardee was stirring the fudge at the stove and the other three were perched about the kitchen, Begorry swinging her feet on the edge of the table and Marilyn and Sally on the sill of the open windows, to the imminent detriment of the screens. Sally was hugging her knees, her back braced against one side of the window frame and her toes against the other.

"I said trade last," she remarked, with the emphasis on "last."

"Well, Branch St. John said you could win the Davis medal in a walk if you weren't so 'bloomin' ' lazy." The Davis medal was the reward for Freshman supremacy in scholarship.

"That's a sort of a backhanded compliment," complained Sally. "A certain person said you danced as if you had been dancing all your life."

"No fair! You have to tell who," protested Mardee.

"Well, it was Don Willis."

"Oh, just little old Don."

Sally gave a shout of mirth at Mardee's flat tone. "Aha! Methinks you had hopes it had been a y m named T A."

"A y m named T A — oh, I know! A young man named Tom Adair," guessed Marilyn.

"Why, certainly!" teased Sally. "Anybody with eyes, who had been to the party last night, could guess that. But maybe you stepped on his toes, Mardee dear."

Sally's trick of talking in initials would have made her conversation unintelligible to an audience less well acquainted with her.

"The c is b!" she cried suddenly, a moment later.

That was easy enough. A horrible odor of scorching sugar informed everybody that the code stood for "the candy is burning." Begorry jumped off the table and ran to stick her nose into the fumes arising from the saucepan, Marilyn and Sally rolled off the window sills and made frantic efforts to grab the spoon from Mardee's inefficient hands, and Mardee, elbowing them away with determination, alternately scraped at the bottom of the pan and examined the sticky gobs adhering to the point of the spoon.

"You see, Sally, how unwise it is to bring up

the subject of a y m named T A when Mardee is stirring the fudge. Faith and you ought to have known better," scolded Begorry.

"How could I tell it was going to affect her that way?" demanded Sally.

"It isn't spoiled," announced Mardee. "It's only a teeny weeny bit scorched." She tried to ignore their teasing but her face was crimson as she sniffed critically at the spoon.

"Ah — full many a rose is also not born to blush unseen," jeered Sally wickedly. "Would that the y m we mentioned could see those b c, which is to say burning cheeks."

"Shut up, Coxie, or I'll t this s at you," threatened Mardee, her gesture making it plain that she meant to throw the spoon at her tormentor.

"Which is to say, 'paste you one on the bean.' All right. G me the b and I'll b the p for you," Sally returned pacifically and attention was directed from Mardee as the others sought to pick out this new puzzle.

"Give me the butter," Marilyn finally suggested.

"And I'll butter the plates for you!" finished Begorry.

"Right — o!" Sally congratulated them, and accepting the butter from Begorry's hands perched herself on a corner of the table with the plates arrayed before her.

The candy, as Mardee had said, was not so seriously damaged that it was necessary to begin over and the cooking and talking proceeded after the momentary excitement as if there had been no interruption.

"Begorry, your hair looked darling last night. You ought to wear it that way all the time."

"Didn't Miss Herrington limber up at the party?"

"As I laughed and told Begorry, she was positively human."

"Marilyn, your dress was so pretty."

"I heard somebody say there wasn't a girl in the school knew how to wear her clothes better than you, Gibs."

"Oh, don't you just adore Miss Rhinebeck?"

"Didn't she serve the most dee-licious refreshments?"

"As I laughed and told Begorry, I could have died eating that charlotte."

"Didn't Sally make a scrumptious gypsy in the charades?"

"Sure. Gypsies and beggar maids and old hags seem to be my forte. I'm never cast for the angels and queens."

"And speaking of charades — here's to Mardee the incomparable." Begorry, who had proposed the toast, raised a bottle of vinegar to her lips, and was greeted with peals of mirth.

"Right well I trow there can never be four other damsels so passing fair as we," was Sally's summing up of the situation, as they had outlined it.

"Honestly, if I do say it as shouldn't, there's not another crowd in the high school half so nice, is there?" Mardee chimed in.

"I second the motion," laughed Marilyn.

"The Fine Four," jibed Sally.

"The Foxy Four," suggested Begorry.

"The Foolish Four, maybe," corrected Marilyn.

"Oh, girls, let's have a club and call it something like that!" exclaimed Mardee.

"I was just about to say that very thing!" cried Sally.

In fact, the idea had spontaneously arisen in the minds of all at once and nobody claimed the credit for it. The only thing they could not agree on was a name. They discussed in turn "The Skyrockets", "The Nixie Pixies", and "The Merry Maids"; Begorry suggested that "Pegaways" would be a good studious name, and Mardee thought "The Hit-or-Miss Club" would come nearer to creating a correct impression of their scholarship; Marilyn said that an even more appropriate name would be "Fudge and Fun." For a time they seriously considered "The Foxy Four."

It was Sally who finally settled the question. And, characteristically, she did it with initials.

"There is no use choosing 'Pegaways' or 'Hit-or-Miss' or anything that refers to studies," she said, "because Daddy Wingfield doesn't allow secret societies in the high school. We have to keep this an out-of-school affair, and it's just between ourselves. Let's just put our initials together and call ourselves the S-B-double-M's and not tell what it means. That sounds sort of mysterious and important."

"Good!" "Oh, yes, let's!" "That's fine!" There was a confusion of comments, and the name was adopted on the spot.

"We'll have the club all through high school and

it will make us good friends all our lives," said sentimental Begorry earnestly, but any tendency to "slop over" was promptly nipped in the bud by Sally, who agreed derisively:

"Yes, I'll tell my seven children about it when these are the d d d b r."

"Seven children — poor Lune!"

"Poor children, I say!"

"What is d d d b r?"

"Dear dead days beyond recall," explained Sally, who was fond of the old songs.

"I guess you will think so if you have seven children to wash and spank!" Marilyn assured her.

The fudge was finished and almost eaten up, the pots and pans were washed and the scars of battle in large measure removed as per promise to Lighty, before this point was reached. Already the afternoon was drawing to a close, and with a hasty swallowing of the last crumbs of fudge on the platter the S-B-double-M's took their leave and separated, not to meet again until the next day at least.

CHAPTER V

MARDEE ANT

The S-B-double-M's appeared at school on Monday wearing white badges with the name of the new club printed on them in ink. The strips of white were small and placed so inconspicuously that only near neighbors and those with sufficient curiosity to look closely could make out what the letters were. But there were enough of the curious-minded to spread the news quickly that some of the girls were labeled, and many were the questions asked as to the meaning of the name and the reason for wearing it. There was some conjecture as to how many had it on, but the S-B-double-M's had been chums for so long that it was not hard for any one to guess just how many of the new badges there were.

The girls were not so open in their interest as the boys. There had been no thought of snobbishness in forming the little club. There were many such friendships in the high school, as there are in every school, and since the S-B-double-M's did not assume that any one else could care to be one of them they did not put themselves in the position of keeping anybody out. Still, it was natural, perhaps, for the girls to hold a little aloof. But the boys took great pains to inspect the badges

closely and to ask if it were contagious, or if it were a new brand of breakfast food, or if that new trimming were the style.

"It's not a sign hung out for anything like smallpox or diphtheria, is it?" asked Ed McKie. Ed was a younger brother of Professor McKie.

Don Willis showed signs of extreme nervousness regarding it and assumed a defensive position with a hastily selected rock as a convenient missile when Mardee and Marilyn and Begorry came down the front steps together at recess.

"It's all right, Don. See our white flag," Mardee reassured him, holding up a handkerchief.

"But how about the rest of you? Are you sure the whole tribe is peacefully disposed?" he inquired.

"There's only Sally besides us," Mardee told him. "And Sally isn't dangerous."

"Well, then," Don heaved a sigh of relief and dropped his rock. "Branch St. John brought his camera to-day to get some pictures of Miss Rhinebeck's window boxes for her. Don't you want him to shoot you four S-B-double-M's together?"

"Oh, goody!" "Yes!" "Will he do it?" an eager chorus replied.

"Sure. Go and get Sally, and I'll tell Branch he's wanted around here at the front."

Begorry, who went in search of Sally, returned with the report that she couldn't come.

"It's studying geometry she is, and can't come at all, at all," she gave her report to the group on

the front steps, which, by the time she returned, had been augmented by Branch St. John with his camera.

"She had better come now if you four want a picture taken together," said Branch. "I won't have my camera here any other time."

"Go on back and tell her she has to come. Mardee, you go with Begorry and help bring her," commanded Don, as master of ceremonies.

Thus reënforced, the committee returned, bringing Sally willy-nilly.

"I can't stay but a minute — honestly," she protested, taking her seat on the steps. "I'd rather be shot at sunrise than face Miss Herrington unprepared."

"Let's all be laughing in the picture," said Begorry.

"All right," the others agreed.

Begorry, sitting on the bottom step and smiling manfully, turned suddenly to discover Sally with a worried pucker between her eyes watching Branch at work with the camera.

"Why, Sally Cox!" she scolded. "You said you were going to laugh."

Sally, with her gaze fixed on Branch instead of on Begorry, and waiting to break into a laugh when he was ready to snap the picture, showed her teeth in a smile, and just then Branch pushed the shutter without noticing Begorry's change of position.

"Now, who didn't laugh, old lady?" Sally belligerently demanded of Begorry.

"Oh, wurra, and did he take the picture just

then?" cried Begorry, chagrined in spite of her joking manner.

"He certainly did, Miss Buttinski. I was watching so I could smile at the proper time and not get my face set in a smile that would look as if I had died that way a month or so ago."

"I can take another picture," offered Branch pacifically, but his attempt to pour oil on the troubled waters only aroused Sally's ire the more.

"I suppose you'll have to," she blustered, "and recess is nearly over and Miss Herrington just lashing up and down in there like a lion in a cage waiting to bite my head off if I don't know my lesson. It's all the fault of this bossy Begorry, too."

"Sook, Boss, sook!" laughed Don, in the persuasive tone one uses to a cow.

By the time the second picture was taken, the fifteen-minute recess was ended and Sally had had no chance to look over her geometry lesson.

"Now see what you have done — all of you," she complained. "If Miss Herrington asks me a question I'll have to say 'Unprepared,' and my knees are shaking at the mere thought of it."

The other S-B-double-M's sought to bolster her fainting spirits, but without avail. Miss Herrington had a reputation for sternness very terrifying to the hapless Freshmen, who were easily intimidated anyway by reason of the newness and strangeness of their surroundings, and Sally, very much inclined to be lazy, was guiltily conscious of wasted study hours. There was a worried look

on her face as the geometry class filed into Miss Herrington's classroom from the study hall the first period after recess.

"Oh, if she just won't call on me," she prayed inwardly. "Maybe she won't. She called on me at the very last recitation. If she doesn't, she will never find out I am unprepared." Cold chills ran up and down her back at the thought of answering "Unprepared" to any question of Miss Herrington's.

That awe-inspiring lady was meanwhile calling the roll.

"Julius Abelman," she said.

"Present," answered one of the boys.

"Nettie Adams."

"Present," said Nettie.

"William Baker."

"Present."

"Alice Bond."

"Present."

There were only a few A's, B's, and C's before Sally Cox's name on the list. Down through Boyle, Carter and Christy read Miss Herrington. Sally, lost in her own thoughts, had not noticed that she was calling the roll.

"Sally Cox," snapped Miss Herrington.

Sally jumped. The fatal moment seemed to have arrived.

"Unprepared," she gulped.

There was a giggle from several of the other S-B-double-M's. But Miss Herrington was not a teacher who could appreciate humor in the classroom.

"You have no need to seek for means to inform me that you don't know anything," she said unkindly. Sally had the good sense to realize that her words were meant to apply to every one in the room and arose from nervousness. Miss Herrington was really too nervous a woman to teach school. In her impatience with stupidity and dread of disorder she "lashed up and down like a lion in a cage," as Sally had said, and Sally was able to take in the situation and make allowances.

But the other S-B-double-M's hailed with delight such a joke on one of their number. They exchanged glances and turned scarlet in their attempts to keep from laughing. Miss Herrington felt the tension and it did not improve her state of mind. To cap the climax, the geometry lesson that very day took up the subject of lunes, and Miss Herrington, totally unable to understand the suppressed hilarity with which her remarks on so prosy a subject were received, waxed more and more acid in temper.

"One lune may have many little ones," she set forth in her exposition.

"Yes — seven," muttered Mardee *sotto voce.*

Marilyn, who was sitting in front of her, exploded with an involuntary snort, and Miss Herrington, at the end of her patience, stopped her discourse with firmly compressed lips and fixed her gaze on poor blushing Marilyn long enough to make her the center of attraction.

"Marilyn Gibson, please take the chair and see if you can make the subject of lunes as entertain-

ing to the class as it seems to be to you," she said at last sarcastically.

"Please excuse me, Miss Herrington," begged Marilyn, humbly enough to soften a heart of stone.

"Perhaps if you sit on the front seat you will find it easier to keep your attention on the lesson," Miss Herrington replied, in a somewhat milder tone.

After Marilyn had taken her place on the front seat, the S-B-double-M's made an honest attempt to settle down, though Sally did succeed in passing a small package containing a clove drop to "Gibs in captivity" while Miss Herrington's back was turned, which Marilyn acknowledged in a fervent note passed by the same route and declaring that the small token of love and trust had been received at a moment when her depression of spirit would make another token like it extremely acceptable.

Altogether, for the S-B-double-M's that Monday geometry period had been especially successful in driving dull care away.

Begorry made a valuable contribution to good cheer just before the luncheon hour on that same day. The Freshman class was addressed during the last period of the morning by the Mr. Davis who gave the Davis medals, a public-spirited citizen who gave this prize each year to the Freshman making the highest average, in memory of a son of his who had died while a student in the first year of the high school. It was his custom to make an address at the beginning of each school year explaining the conditions governing the con-

test and the ends he desired to accomplish by his offer. This morning all the first year classes were suspended for one period and the Freshmen were assembled in their study hall to hear him.

Mr. Davis occupied the whole forty-minute period with an address on Savonarola. He used Savonarola as an example of the scholar, and illustrated with his life the result of a thirst for knowledge and application. As Mr. Davis combined an enthusiasm for learning with persuasive eloquence, he succeeded in holding the attention of his hearers and arousing a lively interest in a character hitherto unknown to many of them.

Begorry, who, like the rest, had listened to him for forty minutes, inquired of the other S-B-double-M's during the lunch hour:

"Who was that man Mr. Davis was talking about — Simon somebody — sounded like Simon Orola?"

Sally gave a whoop.

Poor Begorry had chosen the most unfortunate audience she could have. The four girls were eating their lunch together in the gymnasium in the basement.

"Will you listen to Begorry?" begged Marilyn oratorically.

"Simon Orola!" Mardee repeated after her.

"First cousin to Simple Simon," Sally explained patronizingly. "He was at the fair himself that historic day, but had no penny either, owing to his strange beliefs."

"I don't see what's so funny, Smart Alec," declared Begorry in the hectoring tone she and

Sally were accustomed to employ toward one another.

"Sure!" replied Sally, "for bedad and ain't Simon O'Rola the foine Oirish name?"

"Begorry, you'll never live it down," prophesied Mardee, shaking her head sadly. "Beatrice Simon-pure Nut O'Rola Gorham!"

When Marilyn changed the subject by hazarding a guess as to who would win the Davis medal, Begorry had not yet been set straight as to Simon O'Rola's real name.

Branch St. John was Marilyn's candidate for the honor.

"Branch got the highest marks in our grade last year," she said, "and he's been so many places he just naturally knows more than the rest of us."

"Why don't you work for it, Sally?" asked Mardee.

Sally answered her question with another.

"Why don't you work for it yourself?"

"Me? Why, I could never get it in this world!" declared Mardee.

"You got the next to highest average in the class last year. You came next to Branch St. John, even though you missed almost a month of school when you and Bab had measles. I don't know why you couldn't get it," Sally maintained stoutly.

"Oh, but it will be different in the high school, with so many more students to beat and the work so much harder. And I couldn't have beaten you last year if you had half tried, Sally; you know that."

"Well, you did," said Sally with finality. "And I'll bet a cinnamon bun and three chocolate drops you'll take the Davis medal, too."

The bell rang just then and Mardee said no more, but she did not forget Sally's words.

"Maybe Mardee Ant could do it if Mardee Grasshopper would give her a chance," she thought to herself, as she climbed the two flights of steps to the Freshman study hall.

The Middle and Senior classes shared a study hall downstairs. There the Freshmen joined them for chapel exercises during the first period every morning, sharing the seats with the upper classmen, two to a desk, but they had their separate assembly hall upstairs whence they went in groups to the smaller class rooms of the teachers. As soon as the study hall had filled after lunch, Branch St. John arose and walked to the front of the room.

"Fellow Freshmen," he announced in a loud, clear tone, "Professor McKie has given me permission to say a few words to you before we go to our classes."

It was a most unusual proceeding. Every one had looked up in surprise at the sound of his voice and cast curious glances from him to Professor McKie on the platform behind him in charge of the study hall.

"As you know," Branch proceeded, "it has always been the custom for the Middle and Senior classes to seek to break up the first meeting of the Freshman class and prevent their electing class officers and organizing into a body. We shall have

to win our spurs, so to speak. It has occurred to a few of us that this afternoon immediately after school would be a good time for us to attempt to hold our first meeting. I suggest that when the bell rings for dismissal we retain our seats in the study hall, elect a temporary chairman, and proceed with the class elections before the upper classes have any means of finding out that we are going to hold a meeting."

"It's a good suggestion, boys and girls," Professor McKie backed up Branch's plea. The class had already come to regard him as a friend and to have the feeling that he held pretty much the same point of view that they did with regard to school affairs.

"Those of you who are in favor of it can keep your seats after school, and if we get a quorum we can proceed," Branch concluded, and went back to his desk.

After school the whole class stayed.

"I move we elect Branch St. John our temporary chairman," said one of the boys who was not in Branch's intimate circle of friends.

Branch looked troubled, but before he had time to say anything some one had seconded the motion and it was carried by acclamation.

To Mardee's surprise Branch walked over to her desk and leaned over to say something in her ear.

"I didn't want this chairmanship because I had planned to propose Roscoe Lawhead's name for class president," he said hastily. "I think he deserves a lot of respect for having the grit to

come to school when he is so much older than the rest of us and has to work out of school hours, and I hoped making him president would show him that some of us appreciated all that. It occurred to me that if I am chairman of the meeting, perhaps Mardee Ant would be glad of a chance to nominate him — after what you said."

"Thank you, Branch," said Mardee heartily, giving him a look of understanding.

"It may not be easy to elect him. Don and Ed McKie and I have electioneered around and found some opposition among the boys. Won't you try to speak to as many of the girls as you can before we have to vote?"

Mardee was glad her chance had come so soon to do something to make up to Roscoe Lawhead for Mardee Grasshopper's thoughtless slight at the party. It was Mardee Ant — a strong and sensible Mardee Ant, the Mardee Ant to whom Branch St. John had sworn fealty as a belted knight — that circulated quietly among the girls, explaining the situation to them, pledging their votes, and asking each one she spoke to to pass the word around her immediate neighborhood, while Branch was taking his place on the platform and calling the meeting to order. Professor McKie went out of the study hall and the room was turned over entirely to the class.

"Nominations are in order for class president," said Branch.

Mardee jumped to her feet so quickly that the boy who was spokesman for the opposite faction had hardly started to rise before Branch, already

on the lookout in her direction, had recognized her.

"I nominate as president a boy whom we feel will be an influence for the right kind of scholarship in our class and whom the class is proud to claim — Roscoe Lawhead," she said in a voice that in spite of the excitement and timidity the circumstances had inspired in her was rich and warm with the appreciation Branch had made her feel and the penitence of Mardee Ant for Mardee Grasshopper's conduct.

Roscoe, whom Branch had persuaded to stay for the meeting, looked up with quick surprise, flushed happily, and gave her a glance of humble gratitude.

"Second the motion," called out Ed McKie promptly.

The other boy who had risen was still on his feet, and when Branch had called his name nominated one of the group Branch had warned Mardee against.

"We will vote by ballot," announced Branch. He appointed a collector for each row of desks, who was also to count the votes he took up, and two others to check up the totals. Speed was an essential, for every one momentarily expected a demonstration of some sort from the upper classmen, who might have had time to get wind of the meeting.

Roscoe Lawhead was elected by a small but safe majority and the applause at that announcement had just died down when there was a noise as of thunder at the double doors on either side of the platform.

"It's the Middle and Senior classes!" "Guard those doors!" "Don't let 'em in!" cried a confusion of voices, and, "Nominations are in order for vice-president!" rang out Branch's voice over the tumult.

"I nominate Mardee Gray," shouted Don.

"I second the motion," called quick-witted Sally, surprised but ready.

"Any other nominations?" asked Branch over the booming and thumping at the doors.

There was no reply.

"All in favor of Mardee Gray for vice-president please make it known by saying 'Aye.' "

The concert of "Aye's" added to the thundering at the doors was deafening.

Just then the besiegers, under the leadership of Prince Stanley, succeeded in forcing open one of the doors, and the Freshman boys poured out to prevent their entering and to beat them back down the stairs.

The hall became a seething cauldron of coatless, hatless, collarless and generally disheveled boys, pushing, shoving, wrestling, fighting, milling back and forth, and howling like pandemonium turned loose.

The girls inside the study hall came to the front of the room, partly out of curiosity, and partly to assist in preventing the entrance of the mob.

Miss Herrington, who had no sympathy with such demonstrations, stood at the door to her classroom, tapping in vain upon a little bell. When she asked Professor McKie to go and quell the riot, that discreet young man, who had been

a boy himself not so long before, was reported to have rejoined:

"Not on your merry-go-round!"

At last the upper classes were beaten back sufficiently for the doors to be closed, and with a cordon of Freshmen acting as guard outside, the quorum within proceeded to elect a secretary, a treasurer, and an editor on the *Crow's Foot,* the high school annual.

There was a motion to adjourn and the doors were thrown open. The boys outside, though not so noisy now, were still blocking the way to the head of the girls' stairs, and Mardee and the other S-B-double-M's, with their books under their arms, found that they could not get through.

"Won't you let me pass, please?" asked Mardee politely of the two boys nearest her.

"Make way for the ladies!" called out Prince Stanley, who had heard her plea.

"That's the vice-president," said some one else, recognizing Mardee.

"Make way for the vice-president!" repeated Prince.

"Make way for the ladies! Make way for the vice-president!" the laughing throng about the stairs took up the cry.

"Speech! Speech!" demanded many voices.

"Poor little me!" gasped Mardee, ducking her bobbed head and blushing.

The crowd fell back before the new vice-president like the Red Sea before Moses, except that the parted waters continued to shout "Speech! Speech!" and a poor frightened little Moses scut-

tled through like a scared rabbit with eyes averted and cheeks as red as poppies.

"My! What a celebrity!" exclaimed Marilyn, when they had reached the sidewalk.

"Bedad, an' we niver appr-r-raciated ye before, at all, at all," laughed Begorry.

"I'm scared stiff," declared Mardee. "Tell me, what does a vice-president have to do?"

"Pshaw! The vice-president never has to do anything," Sally assured her for her comfort. "They just chose you for an ornament."

But Mardee went home with a serious feeling of responsibility.

"Days like to-day make me see how much better it is to be Mardee Ant than Mardee Grasshopper," she confided to her father over the book between her elbows on the table by the study lamp. "This was Mardee Ant's day. And Mardee Ant is going to take that Davis medal, too — you see if she doesn't."

CHAPTER VI

FOOTBALL AND CHRYSANTHEMUMS

Mardee Ant had the upper hand for several weeks after the Freshman elections. Roscoe Lawhead sought her out on the day after the class elections.

"I've got to thank you for nominating me yesterday. And not only for nominating me, but for the way you nominated me," he said, with so much shy ardor in spite of his awkwardness that Mardee felt aglow with virtue.

Branch St. John, too, seemed to be trying to make up for his earlier reproof and never lost an opportunity to express his approval now. There was something about Branch's companionship — his congenial taste for books, his intelligent conversation, his appreciative friendliness — which made Mardee Ant's interests seem attractive in his society.

The high school had settled down now into a steady routine, and Doctor Gray was firm in requiring both his daughters to stay at home and study on school nights, frolicking only on Fridays and Saturdays.

Mardee Grasshopper was inclined to pout about this and feel a little sorry for herself.

"Daddy, you're too strict," she complained.

"All the other boys and girls can go places on other nights besides Fridays."

"All?" queried her mother. The conversation had taken place around the evening lamp in the dining-room. Mrs. Gray was darning stockings and the two girls were supposed to be getting their lessons.

"Well — nearly all," amended Mardee.

Mrs. Gray hummed a bar or two from "Pinafore." "'And I'm never, never sick at sea.' 'What, never?' 'No, never!' 'What! Never?' 'Well, hardly ever,'" she sang with a mischievous smile at Mardee, and Mardee was obliged in spite of herself to smile.

It was true that her father's ruling had prevented her from accepting two or three invitations to evening parties which others of her friends whose parents were not so careful had attended.

"But you can't keep late hours and that peaches-and-cream complexion, those dusk-and-violet eyes, that sunshine-caught-in-a-mesh hair, and that dew-on-a-rosebud mouth, too," her father reminded her with a look as tender and poetic as his words and a gentle caress on her head that went far to soften his disciplinary measures. "You have not learned to value the gifts nature has given you, or you would take more care of them," he smiled.

And it was true that that fairy radiance of early girlhood which was Mardee's had proved a magic wand to open many doors to her. Mardee was attracting attention in her new high school surroundings and making new friends.

The football season had opened and as the dusty Southern September glided into blue and golden October, she spent most of her afternoons with the other spectators of the practice games on the shady benches surrounding the high school athletic field. Early in the season the high school team played one or two regular games with local grammar school and Y. M. C. A. teams at Columbia Park, the city ball ground, and the first big game of the year was scheduled for the second Saturday in October with Lakemont, a prep school from another town in the same section of the State.

A few days before the game a note was slipped into Mardee's hand during chapel exercises. The Freshmen had come downstairs for chapel, and Mardee was sitting in a Senior girl's desk with her. She could see Tom Adair across on the boys' side of the room, with a Freshman boy sharing his desk.

"Dear Mardee: Will you go to the football game with me Saturday? Cliff Nash has asked Marilyn Gibson, and we four can go out to the park together. Tom Adair," Mardee read under the cover of the desk.

Tom Adair, though too light in weight for the first team, played on the scrubs, and Cliff Nash was business manager.

She leaned forward and nodded and smiled when she found Tom looking at her.

"I was afraid to wait all day and give Don Willis and Branch St. John and Ed McKie and those other Freshies in your train a chance to ask

you during classes," he explained, on the way home after school. "Those younger fellows have the advantage of me."

She had found Tom waiting by one of the posts at the foot of the schoolyard steps when she came out in the afternoon. His own line went out through a side entrance, but he had fallen into the habit of hurrying to Mardee's gate and waiting beside the post until she came by. Mardee could see him making a dash for the main entrance the minute he reached his own gate, before she left the building, and she was never surprised when he stepped out from behind the post and dispossessed her of her books. From the first night he had met her, at Miss Rhinebeck's party, Tom had made no secret of his favoritism, and Mardee yielded to the attraction of his half-teasing, half-flattering manner and basked in the sunshine of his open admiration. He was an attractive boy, — fair and slender and just a little girlish in appearance, though generally considered very handsome in the high school, with an easy gallantry that made him popular among the girls, and a gift for entertaining nonsense. For real fineness of character he could not compare with Branch St. John, but he was clean-minded and gentlemanly, and Mardee liked them both for different reasons. It was Mardee Ant who liked Branch and sought to live up to the best that was in her to keep his good opinion, and Mardee Grasshopper who laughed with Tom Adair and danced in the sunshine of his nonsensical flattery.

"What makes you think I'm such a belle?" she

answered his remark about the competition of Don and Branch and Ed.

"Let me see your hand."

Mardee obediently held out one soft and somewhat grimy palm.

"There it is!" declared Tom, making a deep study of the lines in her hand. "I could see it in your face, too — much admiration — many friends — a fickle disposition." He shook his head sadly.

"Now let's see what's in your hand," commanded Mardee.

Tom held out a still grimier paw.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" sighed Mardee mournfully. "And yet I might have seen it in your face — a false smile — a flattering tongue!"

Tom beat his breast dramatically.

"Injustice!" he ranted. "I am unappreciated! My trusting candor has been derided. Nevermore will I say your face is fair."

"Oh, very well," shrugged Mardee with exaggerated unconcern; "nevermore, perhaps, will you say my heart is fickle. It is well to be on our guard against each other."

"Honors are even," laughed Tom, coming down to earth as they caught up with another group going home from school and fell in with them. The sidewalks along Channing Avenue just at this time of day were lively with groups of boys and girls going home from school. The high school was on Eighth Street, which crossed Channing Avenue, but Channing Avenue was the main residential thoroughfare of the city and most of the high school boys and girls followed it for a part

of their way home, at any rate. The Grays lived three blocks off Channing Avenue on a shady and narrow side street called Green Street. At Mardee's corner she and Tom bade good-by to the others and strolled slowly down the hill towards her home.

"I'll be here at two o'clock on Saturday," Tom said, as they parted. "If the pater's heart happens to be in the right place when the day comes we'll ride out to the park in a car. If he can't be made to listen to reason, we'll have a motorman for our chauffeur and ride in the people's limousine."

"Better be a good boy and keep on the right side of him all this week," advised Mardee, laughing.

Tom evidently took her advice, for on Saturday afternoon he drove up to the door in the car which Mardee knew was his father's little business runabout. Cliff and Marilyn were already on the seat beside him, resplendent in purple and white ribbons, a purple and white high school pennant on a cane in Cliff's hands, and two chrysanthemums — a purple one and a white one — pinned to Marilyn's coat.

"Aren't we fine?" demanded Marilyn, reaching for the cane and giving the pennant a flourish.

"Hurrah for us!" responded Mardee, returning the salute with a wave of the satin streamers in her own hand.

"There are two more chrysanthemums here for you," announced Tom, producing a long florist's box. "We went by Daly's as we came up."

Mardee opened the box and took out the two great handsome flowers with squeals of delight.

"Climb in," Cliff invited her. He had climbed out himself, during the presentation of Tom's floral offering. "It's me for the running board."

"Oh, Cliff, you'll fall off," Mardee protested, nevertheless squeezing herself into the space he had vacated.

"Just like this. See!" And Cliff seated himself on the floor with his feet stuck out through the open door.

Cliff Nash was a complete contrast in appearance to his chum. His dark complexion, heavy brows, and prominent high-bridged nose had led Sally Cox to characterize him as a pirate of the Spanish Main, and the apt characterization had been repeated and become very generally known. Cliff had found Marilyn's rebellious discontent as interesting in its way as had Tom Mardee's sweet girlishness, and the two were as often together as Tom and Mardee. Altogether, they made a very congenial foursome.

"We want you two girls to whoop 'em up for the home team like all creation!" said Cliff on the way to the ball park.

But no such request was needed. Both Mardee and Marilyn were in the best of good spirits and ran up and down the side lines in the caressing autumn sunshine, following the plays and shouting encouragement to the players.

The big crowd was of course in sympathy with the high school, and from the first the game went against the visitors. But both sides played real

football, and the Lakemont team was made up of well-bred boys and clean players who accepted defeat with a good grace.

At the end of the first quarter, Mardee and Tom, with Marilyn and Cliff and some of the other girls and boys, Sally and Begorry among them, stopped by the lines near the spot where the visiting team was resting on the grass. Their coach was haranguing them, but one of the players on the outskirts of the group caught sight of Mardee laughing with her friends. She did make a pretty picture — eyes sparkling, teeth flashing, tam-o'-shanter rakishly awry, her whole slim body swaying as lightly as grass in the wind — and it was evident that he was paying more attention to her than to his coach. Mardee, spinning on her heel, happened to catch his eye and broke off in the midst of a laughing remark to shake her colors in his face and repeat:

"Hurrah for us!"

Laughing, he replied: "I wish you would give me those chrysanthemums."

"No," answered Mardee, "but I'll bet them against your noseguard that you won't win the game."

"Make it your purple and white ones against a dozen yellow ones and I'll take you."

The Lakemont colors were green and gold.

Mardee agreed, amidst much laughter from the bystanders, and just then the referee blew his whistle for the next quarter to begin.

After the game had ended in a high school victory Professor McKie, who was the high school

coach, and Cliff Nash took the visiting team around to introduce them to some of the girls, and Mardee met the player she had made the bet with. His name was Philip Bolling.

"It isn't fair to beat you and take your flowers, too," she smiled, as she gave him her hand. "I release you from your debt."

"But you won't give me your flowers?" begged her football friend.

"No, these were a gift."

Just then Cliff came up.

"Some of the high school fellows are getting up a dance for to-night in honor of the visitors," he said.

"Go with me, Mardee?" asked Tom quickly. He had been standing near her and had turned to her when Cliff spoke.

"Marilyn is going with me," added Cliff. "Let's all four go together."

"Oh, goody — I'd love to!" was Mardee's satisfying, if informal acceptance.

"What will you give me, then?" Philip Bolling persisted, as soon as the interruption was over.

"How about a dance to-night? Would that do?"

"I couldn't keep that," he objected. "But make it two, and we'll talk about it to-night."

So Mardee agreed.

She was too breathless with excitement to want any supper. A football game, a new friend, and a dance all in one day! But Doctor Gray insisted upon her eating something.

While the family was at the supper table the

doorbell rang, and Bab, who had answered it, came back into the dining-room bearing a florist's box, — the second for Mardee on this wonderful day, and an enormous one this time.

"For you, Mardee," announced Bab, all agog. "A messenger brought it."

Mardee seized it eagerly and laid it on the table, on top of the dishes at her place. Hastily she opened it, and there, in a nest of asparagus fern and glowing warmly in the light from overhead, lay twelve huge yellow chrysanthemums.

Mardee gathered them to her breast exultantly.

"Philip Bolling," read Bab, holding up the card. The family had already heard the story of the football player.

"I never saw so many flowers in my life, and I'm going to carry them every one to-night," pronounced Mardee, smiling triumphantly over her great armful of flowers.

"My! Won't you look like a walking chrysanthemum show?" said Bab.

The flowers almost hid the organdie party dress, but they made a wonderful setting for the radiant face above them.

Doctor Gray took Mardee and Tom in his automobile to the high school, where the dance was to be held in the girls' gymnasium.

"The young man that escorts this little daughter of mine around has to escort her old daddy, too," he always said, "and since that is the case we might as well go in my car." He always showed up at half-past ten to take Mardee and her escort home, too.

"Oh, Mardee!" whispered Marilyn, when Mardee met her at the door of the gymnasium, smiling over the heads of the chrysanthemums. "From your football friend?"

"Oh, wirra, wirra, the darlint she looks!" exclaimed Begorry, holding up both palms.

"Solomon i a h g!" gasped Sally.

"Solomon in all his glory — that's easy," interpreted Marilyn.

"No — the Incomparable!" laughed Begorry — for the S-B-double-M's had never ceased to tease Mardee about her part in the charades at Miss Rhinebeck's party.

"When are you going to give me a dance, Mardee?" asked Don.

"I have the first with Tom," she answered. "But you may have the second."

"And where do I come in?" inquired Cliff.

"I'll have to save one near the first for Philip Bolling," Mardee demurred, rescuing her card from him. The excitement and popularity and compliments had gone to her head. It was Mardee Grasshopper who was chattering, flushed and sparkling, with the group of boys around her.

She had all of her dances engaged — two according to her agreement with Philip Bolling — when the home boys decided that on account of the number of stags the visitors were not getting enough dances, and turned the dance into a game of Paul Jones. After that, Mardee, dancing with her great bunch of flowers over one arm, never got more than halfway around the room with one partner.

But Philip Bolling protested.

"Look here, Miss Mardee," he demanded, "where do my two dances come in?"

"I could sit them out with you," suggested Mardee. "It would take at least that long to tell you how pretty the chrysanthemums are."

"No, I don't want to be a pig and keep the other fellows from dancing with you. And I'd rather dance than sit it out. I like dancing with you. But if we dance, then somebody is sure to take you away from me, and the last fellow you dance with has the intermission with you."

"But you know I always like to have you come up in the intermission."

"Yes — if I can get in anywhere on the outskirts of the ring! Oh, you popular girls! But I tell you what I can do if you'll agree. I have a 'buddy' on the team — John Graves. John and I will start in when the music has played just about so long — I'll break in on the fellow you're dancing with — then if anybody breaks on me John will break on him and give you back to me. In that way, one or the other of us will be pretty sure to be dancing with you when the music stops."

Mardee agreed, and the scheme worked like a charm. Either Philip Bolling or John Graves was dancing with her at the end of every dance, and the other Lakemont boys, seeing her with one of their number, flocked around her in the intermissions.

"See here — this thing happens too regularly

to be accidental!" Tom Adair complained to Philip Bolling at last. "We want you fellows to have a good time and all that, but you can't take our prettiest girl away from us entirely."

Mardee blushed at the compliment and the Lakemont boys grew more determined than ever. They were still engaged in a desperate battle for her dances when half-past ten and Doctor Gray arrived.

"It's enough to turn a more experienced head," he reflected, as he watched his little girl bobbing about like one of her great bunch of flowers, her lithe body swaying to the music, the new white slippers sliding rhythmically, as light as thistledown.

"Too many boys to-night, aren't there?" he inquired dryly, when Mardee and her partner brought up smiling beside him at a crashing final chord of the music. "Not enough girls to go around — I never saw such belles in my life! Makes ordinary, everyday affairs seem pretty humdrum, doesn't it?"

Mardee looked up into his eyes with an understanding twinkle in her own.

"I am Mardee Grasshopper, am I?" she asked, fully comprehending his intention of giving her vanity a sly jolt.

"You are writing the story of your life, you know, with Mardee Ant as the heroine, and Mardee Grasshopper as the villain. This seems to be one of those chapters when the villain is getting in some powerful licks. Let's go home now — and end the chapter."

But it was not a very penitent looking Mardee Grasshopper who followed him out of the gymnasium, nodding to right and left over her flowers and smiling a good night to every one she passed.

CHAPTER VII

ON CROW'S NEST MOUNTAIN

MARDEE had just fallen into a sound sleep the night of the dance for the Lakemont boys when she was awakened by a terrific noise. To her startled senses, still confused by sleep, it seemed to have been a piercing shriek. That Seldom Fed had heard it too was plain, for he was in a fever of audible protest down in the back hall, where he had been locked up for the night, and his barking added to the general confusion and made it still harder for Mardee to tell just exactly what she had heard. Of one thing she was sure. She could hear the babble of many voices in the street outside.

"Do you hear something, Bab?" she whispered, clutching her sister in the dark.

"Did you take me for a corpse?" demanded Bab. "Don't be frightened, Silly. Nobody's trying to slip up on us, and it can't get any worse than it is already."

Just then there was another shriek. Mardee could see the reasonableness of Bab's philosophy. Nothing could possibly make any more noise, and they were not hurt yet. It was hard to frighten steady little Bab. The shriek was repeated over and over again and seemed to be coming closer.

Seldom Fed's protests increased to frenzy. But the two girls, straining their ears, could make out that the mingled voices out in the street were laughing and catcalling and shouting "Whoa!" and "Get up!" and less intelligible long sentences in which "Lakemont" and "High School" seemed to have a part.

"Oh!" breathed Mardee with relief. "It's just the boys celebrating their football victory." She loosened her grip on Bab and the two sprang out of bed and knelt by the open window.

"It's a willopus wallopus!" exclaimed Bab.

Outside, an enormous road roller had come to a stop before the Grays' steps, belching forth smoke and glowing horribly when its engine door was opened for more coal. It was overflowing with boys,— on the driver's seat, on the steps, on top, in front, and behind. Hitched to it was a wagon filled with chairs, and that, too, had the appearance of being encrusted with boys.

"All aboard for Lakemont!" shouted several would-be conductors of the football special.

"C. H. S. Rah! Rah!
C. H. S. Rah! Rah!
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Channingsburg! Channingsburg!
Rah! Rah! Rah!

"What's the matter with us?
We're all right!
Who's all right?
Channingsburg High!
Who says so?
Lakemont!"

Bab had slipped downstairs and brought Seldom Fed up from the back hall. He had come vociferously, and standing at the window with his front paws on the sill he scolded the football rooters angrily.

Doctor and Mrs. Gray had come in from their room and taken a stand behind the girls, screened by the window curtains. Lights could be seen flashing in the windows all over the quiet neighborhood.

"Giddap! All aboard for Lakemont!" shouted a dozen voices at last, and there was a clanking and groaning, a succession of ear-splitting shrieks from the whistle, and the monster lumbered down the street to bear the news of victory to other parts of the city.

"Where do you suppose they got that thing?" laughed Mardee, turning to the rest of the family when the uproar had subsided.

"They are paving those new streets in Benton Place," said Bab.

"The boys must have fired the thing up and come all the way from Benton Place," hazarded Doctor Gray.

He and Mrs. Gray went back to bed, and Bab, after dragging Seldom Fed by the collar down to his rug in the back hall, crawled in beside Mardee and the house settled down to sleep.

The next morning the road roller passed again before breakfast, going back the way it had come, but manned this time by an overalled crew, and Don Willis, who had come out on his front porch to watch its progress, doubled up with laughter.

"How far did you go with it last night?" Mardee called across from the Grays' front porch.

"We didn't get far beyond here," Don confided, between bursts of mirth. "Somebody had telephoned the police station. I wish you'd seen the boys falling off the willopus wallopus when they were tipped off that the coppers were chasing them."

Soon after breakfast that morning the telephone rang and Mardee, who answered it, recognized Philip Bolling's voice.

"I am at the station," he told her. "Our train pulls out in ten minutes, but I couldn't leave town without saying good-by."

"Good-by, Philip," laughed Mardee. "You're a good scout and I hope Lakemont will win all the rest of her games."

"Say, I got something to remember you by."

"You did?"

"Yes. I pulled off the head of one of your chrysanthemums. To me you'll always be my little chrysanthemum friend."

"Seems to me," opined Mardee, "that after your generous box of flowers I'd always remember you as *my* chrysanthemum friend."

"Well — so long. Save me a dance if I make the baseball team and come back in the spring."

"I will," promised Mardee, and with another "good-by" Philip hung up the receiver.

The effect of the previous day's gayety had been to give Mardee Grasshopper a strangle hold on Mardee Ant, and Mardee Ant was long in gaining the advantage. For one reason, Mardee saw

more and more of Tom Adair after the Lakewood game and dance, and Tom always appealed to the frivolous, butterfly side of her nature.

Late in October, when the skies were their deepest blue and the autumn woods their warmest reds and yellows, Marilyn Gibson had a house party on Crow's Nest Mountain and invited Mardee and Tom and Cliff Nash.

Marilyn's mother was fond of entertaining. She and her older daughter, Rosemary, who was six years Marilyn's senior, moved in a fashionable set, and the week-end parties which they gave at their elaborate mountain cottage, as well as the more formal functions at their pretentious home down in the city, were considered very smart.

This particular house party, however, was "only a family affair", as Mrs. Gibson told Mrs. Gray over the telephone when she invited Mardee.

"Saturday is Mr. Gibson's birthday," she explained. "He always likes to get out of town for a week-end in the autumn before the leaves have fallen, and he nearly always takes a little vacation from business at our cottage on Crow's Nest. He does not enjoy formal social functions in celebration of his birthday, but nothing would please him more than to have a party of Marilyn's little friends go up with us on Friday afternoon to stay through Sunday."

"Mardee will appreciate Marilyn's thinking of her," said Mrs. Gray, her quiet tone in marked contrast to Mrs. Gibson's studied vivacity.

"She chose Mardee and Tom Adair and Cliff Nash. Those four seem to have been together a

good deal this fall, and I am glad of the association for Marilyn. She has been so moody and discontented since she got old enough to realize what her complexion means to her that I am glad of an interest that takes her out of herself." The affected voice had ended on a note of genuine concern and Mrs. Gray accepted the invitation for Mardee with a warmer cordiality than she would have had it not been for the appeal from one mother to another.

A great many Channingsburg people had summer homes on the near-by mountains. Channingsburg was delightfully situated, for a southern city, in a valley encircled by mountains, which enabled its residents to escape during the hot months to summer homes where, though living in a cooler climate, they were yet near enough the town for the men of the family to go back and forth to business every day. There was a colony of such homes on Crow's Nest. The Grays had one,— a simple rustic shack back in the woods and therefore in a less fashionable neighborhood than the Gibsons', which was near the hotel. There were similar colonies on High Top and Chestnut Ridge, two other peaks near the city.

Marilyn's house party, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Gibson, Marilyn's sister Rosemary, Marilyn, Mardee, Tom, and Cliff, left town on Friday afternoon in two automobiles, Mr. Gibson and the young people in one car, and Mrs. Gibson and the servants, with the supplies, including a monster turkey for the birthday dinner, in another. Mrs. Gibson was an experienced and delightful hostess.

By the time the second automobile, containing the guests, had arrived, the house was all ready for them, with a big wood fire blazing in the living-room, an inviting odor of cooking emanating from the kitchen, and a cozy, "lived-in" air about all of the bedrooms.

"Three cheers for Crow's Nest!" cried Mr. Gibson, throwing his cap into the air and capering about like a boy the minute he stepped into the house. "I feel ten years younger when I get out of sight of the store and breathe the air of this mountain top. I bet I could pile those two rocking-chairs together and take off my shoes and jump over them. Let's see you do it, Cliff!"

"Give me leave to jump from the stairs there?" asked Cliff, laughing and pointing to the top of the stairs, which went up across the back of the living-room.

"Oh, no. Oh, no."

"Well, you're younger than I, sir, then, or at any rate a better jumper," declared Cliff, for Mr. Gibson had set one chair inside of the other and together they reached almost up to the chandelier.

"Don't you believe I can do it?" asked Mr. Gibson.

"I won't say you can't, sir," replied Cliff, to whom he had addressed all his questions, while the others looked on and laughed.

"Want to see me try?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll give you a chance at it first, if you want to try." Mr. Gibson was already removing his shoes.

"Oh, no, thank you, sir."

He carefully placed the two shoes side by side on the hearthrug, then toed an imaginary mark, swung his arms violently, and jumped — over the shoes.

"There! I told you I could pile those two chairs on top of each other, take off my shoes and jump over them. Sorry you're not such a good jumper, old man."

In the burst of hilarity that ensued, Mr. Gibson beckoned to Mardee and handed her his automobile cap with a few whispered words. Tom, who was pounding Cliff on the shoulder, and Marilyn and Rosemary did not see Mardee rub the top of the cap in the soot at the back of the wide stone fireplace. It was a dark wool mixture, and the resulting smudge was not in the least noticeable.

"Yes, sir!" Mr. Gibson was boasting, with a swagger. "I'm a better jumper than you young fellows, and I'm just as sound in wind and limb. Now, Tom, let's see if your teeth are any stronger than mine. Mardee, hand me that cap, please."

Mardee gave him the cap, which he handled carefully by the clean visor.

"Now I will stick this pin through the top — so — and I want to see if you can pull it out with your teeth."

Tom obediently took the cap and pressed his face against it to get a firm hold on the pin.

When in triumph he withdrew the pin he was completely at a loss to understand the shout that greeted his appearance, and not until Marilyn led him to a mirror and he saw for himself the effect

of the black daubs on his pink cheeks and fair forehead did the look of astonishment leave his face.

"Are you children all ready for supper?" asked Mrs. Gibson, coming down the stairs.

"No'm. Tom's all dirty," giggled Mardee, and Mrs. Gibson, joining in the laugh, led him away to soap and water before supper was announced.

For the evening Mrs. Gibson had arranged a guessing game of "Literary Titles" in which the titles were suggested by small objects or pictures attached to numbered cards.

"The Mill on the Floss" was represented by a mill pinned to a skein of sewing silk; "The Monastery" was shown by means of a picture of a cloistered building with monks in evidence; a bearded and booted fellow in a Russian blouse and a miniature garden hoe, depicted "Ivanhoe"; some people alighting from a train with traveling bags in their hands were meant to be "The Newcomes."

"This fellow looks like Cliff," declared Tom, puzzling over a villainous-looking outlaw in top boots and slouch hat, with a knife in his mouth.

"I know! I know! 'The Pirate!' guessed Mardee, but tenderheartedly refrained from explaining that the name was suggested by Sally's description of Cliff.

Cliff was not slow to take revenge.

"Why, here's a picture of Tom!" he cried, pointing out a card intended to portray "Travels with a Donkey."

"The girls will have to tell us what this one is

meant for," said Tom, when the laugh at his expense had subsided. The card he referred to was decorated with a dorine and a transfer ticket.

"Anybody would know what it was meant for," protested Cliff. "This part is meant to do this with," and looking into the mirror with a simpering smile meant to imitate the smirk of a girl powdering her nose, he gave mincing dabs at his own protruding beak with the tiny powder puff.

"Goodness nose!" jibed Tom.

"Somebody bring some more powder!" begged Marilyn. "There can't be enough in the box to cover Cliff's nose."

"And this part is meant to take a ride on," proceeded Cliff, unmoved by their banter, and indicating the transfer ticket. "Now the only thing left to decide is, what book has a name anything like 'A Beautiful Car Ride.' "

" 'Beautiful' is all wrong, old man. You couldn't see yourself," Tom corrected him. "The conceit of some people!"

"Maybe Tom is getting warm," mused Mardee. "Conceit is vanity, and a dorine is a vanity box."

"Hooray! And a transfer ticket is a fare. 'Vanity Fair.' Now who says I haven't a right to be conceited?" demanded Cliff. "I'd rather be smart than pretty."

"Hamlet" was set forth in the picture of a ham cut out of the advertising section of some magazine, and a "For Rent" sign.

"Yum-yum! The ham what am!" gloated Tom. "I'd rather buy it outright than rent it."

"I bet this is what would happen to you if you

did," laughed Mardee, holding up a realistic portrait of a nightmare jabbing some hapless sleeper with a pitchfork, and serving to illustrate "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Mardee lost the card on which she was supposed to be writing her answers, and when she found it again it was nearly filled with handwriting that was plainly Mr. Gibson's. But that gentleman, when she looked at him, was going through an elaborate pantomime of shutting one eye and laying his forefinger on his lips, and she entered into a conspiracy of silence with him. When it developed that there were prizes, however, and Mardee won the first, a copy of "The Hundred Best Books," she was sorry she had not given him away.

"It will be ours together," she whispered to him apologetically. "You read it and then I'll read it and then you read it and then I'll read it — "

"Until after a while we shall both become addicted to the habit of reading 'The Hundred Best Books'," he finished for her, evidently as delighted with the nonsense as she was. "What a good thing the prize wasn't anything that could form a pernicious habit — 'The Hundred Worst Books', for instance."

"Let's play charades," Marilyn had meanwhile proposed. "Let Cliff and Tom be the captains."

Cliff chose Mardee and Mr. Gibson; Tom, Marilyn, Mrs. Gibson, and Rosemary.

Tom's side had the first turn and presented "grateful", with Rosemary putting on airs as a

"great" person and Tom going through antics that showed he was "full." Then Cliff's side put on "cantaloup" with Mardee and Cliff prevented by a watchful father from eloping; and Tom's side came back with "humbug." But the histrionic triumph of the evening was "Roman", enacted by Mr. Gibson, Mardee, and Cliff.

First they all came out and stood in a row. The others guessed "three" and then "line", and Mr. Gibson, thinking they were coming too close, went through some mystic gestures to lead them astray. Mr. Gibson appeared alone in the syllable "man" but to keep it from being too easy to guess he hopped in like a frog. Then Cliff came in, wrapped in a tablecloth toga, and instantly Tom recognized his nationality.

"You didn't need the toga with that Roman nose," he shouted. "If anybody else had come in dressed up like that we might have had to guess a while, particularly after Mr. Gibson had made us think he was a frog instead of a man, but to send in the old Roman himself was a dead give-away."

At the top of the stairs leading up from the living-room a railing ran the length of the upper hall parallel to the staircase. At bedtime every one went into the dining-room to eat some fudge before going to bed, and it happened that the three girls started up the stairs first and without any malicious intent whatever sat down on the top step to talk a while. When Mr. Gibson and the boys came they looked so suspiciously at the barrier above them that it put an idea into the

girls' heads, and they stiffened out in a row to prevent their passing.

A lively tussle ensued, but finally, after a whispered consultation, the three boys — for Mr. Gibson on that night was no more grown up than the others — climbed over the railing into the upper hall, made a surprise attack on the girls from the rear, bore them shrieking and kicking down the stairs again, deposited them in the living-room, and then ran back to establish themselves in a forbidding row upon the top step.

"Ho! Ho! Now who can't get upstairs?" they taunted. And when Mrs. Gibson, who had gone to the kitchen for some last housewifely rites, joined the girls in the living-room, the boys made all four of them climb over the railing into the upper hall before they could get to their rooms to go to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

A BIRTHDAY DINNER AND A SCARE

Mr. Gibson's birthday dawned crisp and frosty, — one of those perfect fall days that convince one autumn is the loveliest season of the year.

Marilyn, looking between the cretonne curtains of the dormer window beside the bed she shared with Mardee, saw her father shaking the persimmon tree in the front yard.

"Wake up, Mard. Here's a chance to give Dad his birthday licks before breakfast," she exclaimed, springing out on the cold floor and hugging a warm bathrobe about her.

"I brought a little present for him in my suitcase — just a handkerchief I embroidered with his initials — and I thought I'd slip that under his plate at breakfast," said Mardee, following Marilyn's example and taking a look out of the window as she got up. "Oh, look how white the frost looks! Just like snow!"

Dressing was the work of but a few minutes, but by the time the two had pulled on their warm sweaters and tam-o'-shanters and slipped down to the dining-room to deposit their birthday packages in the already considerable pile by Mr. Gibson's plate, they found that Tom and Cliff had beaten them outdoors and were eating persimmons under the tree with Mr. Gibson.

"Fifty licks, Dad — and one to grow on," threatened Marilyn, as they opened the front door.

"Need any help, sir?" offered Cliff, and picking up a handful of green persimmons fired them in rapid succession toward the porch.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Marilyn, ducking and throwing up her arms to protect her head, but Mardee seized a pillow out of the swing and aimed a telling shot directly at Cliff's head. He looked around just in time to get it full in the face, and while Tom stopped gathering green persimmons to laugh at Cliff's discomfiture, the girls took advantage of their opportunity to scurry off the porch and barricade themselves within a scuppernong arbor in the yard at the side of the house.

Mr. Gibson joined forces with the boys and together they stormed the arbor with persimmons. It was built in the form of a summer house with two entrances, which made of it an excellent fortification. No matter which side the attacking party advanced from, the defenders of the fort could easily dodge around to the other, and if the besiegers divided and came from both sides at once, the besieged could slip inside and hurl scuppernongs out of the doorways. It is true that the girls' missiles very rarely hit their mark, but they were beginning to be very chesty about their success in warding off their opponents' shots when a cracked "Tinkle, tinkle" in the woods gave Mr. Gibson an idea.

"Now watch me make 'em run!" he boasted, laughing in high glee.

"Sook, Bossy! Sook, Bossy!" he called entic-

ingly, and a mild-eyed stray cow wandered toward him out of the woods. Stepping behind her he uttered a commanding "Soy!" which sent her in the direction of the arbor. With shrieks of terror the erstwhile bold garrison deserted its post and ran pell-mell for the kitchen, abandoning the idea of the fifty licks and one to grow on. Thence they issued forth no more until two heads were put out of a narrow crack in the kitchen door to announce to the laughing enemy:

"Sausage and waffles! You'd better come in if you don't want to miss something grand."

Opening the presents was a ceremony which took so much time that Mrs. Gibson was finally obliged to shoo her family away from the breakfast table to clear the decks for the birthday dinner preparations. The masculine contingent went hunting and Marilyn and Mardee begged Mrs. Gibson to put them to work in the kitchen. As a matter of fact, nearly all the preparations had been made days before. Mrs. Gibson was a far-seeing housewife and hostess. She had brought to the mountain with her jars and boxes and bowls of everything that could possibly be carried already prepared, and although she allowed the girls to cut the grapefruits and put the candles on the cake and do a few other little odd jobs which would satisfy their craving to be in the thick of the interesting proceedings, there really was not enough to keep them busy for long, and they wandered off to the dining-room.

"Let us write the place cards for you, Mamma," begged Marilyn. Mrs. Gibson had come in with a

package of the hand-painted place cards she always kept a supply of.

"Certainly," she replied, and counted out seven into Marilyn's outstretched hand.

"Let's put a rhyme on each one instead of just the name," suggested Mardee.

"Oh, Mardee, you really are possessed of genius to think of such a ripping thing! It will give us a chance to get back at the boys for all the tricks they have played on us." Marilyn fished two pencils out of the desk in the living-room, and the two girls curled up on the chimney seat to try out their poetical effusions on scraps of waste paper.

It took a great deal of rhyming and consultation and scratching out and rewriting to evolve the finished product of their united efforts, and the work was interrupted by many spasms of mirth.

"Oh, listen to this for Cliff!" cried Marilyn, after having covered the back of an envelope with tentative couplets:

"This seat is for you, Clifford Nash,
Which proves Mrs. Gibson quite rash;
When you've eaten your share
She won't have, I declare,
Any left for to make turkey hash."

"Oh, splendid!" approved Mardee. "Now let's get some joke on Tom."

"About the stairs! To pay him back for making us climb the railing! Stair rhymes with Adair," cried Marilyn hopefully.

"How's this?" offered Mardee:

"Here sits a young man named Adair,
Who really should eat on the stair;
He sits there so tight
At bedtime at night
He does not deserve this good chair."

They fell on each other's neck in mutual congratulation and bobbed up and down so enthusiastically they could hardly write the lines.

"Now let's fix Dad," giggled Marilyn.

"Here goes," Mardee complied:

"Papa Gibs, the jumping jack,
May have this chair, seat, arms and back,
Unless perchance he feels the lack
Of two chairs in a big tall stack."

"Won't you sit here,
Please, Mamma dear?"

Marilyn wrote on her mother's card, and Mardee scribbled on Rosemary's:

"Sister Rosie, too,
Here's a place for you."

At half-past twelve the hunters returned with a bagful of birds for to-morrow's breakfast and proclaimed themselves hungry enough to eat the tablecloth and knives and forks unless something else were put upon the table pretty promptly.

"Look out! I might chew your hand off, too!" Tom warned Marilyn fiercely when she held out a shelled walnut to appease his appetite.

"It is safer to feed the bears from a distance," laughed Mardee, and tossed Mr. Gibson a piece of candy from halfway across the room, whereupon Cliff set up a horrible growling and made lunges in her direction.

"Give the middle-sized bear something, Marilyn, quick!" cried Mardee in mock alarm.

"'The middle-sized bear!'" quoted Tom. "Now which of us two is the great big old bear and which the teeny-weeny bear? That's what I want to know!"

"Guess!" challenged Mardee.

"I'll be the teeny-weeny bear if Mardee will have me for her Teddy," offered Mr. Gibson, and Mardee clapped her hands in delight.

The place cards caused much merriment.

"I'll tell you what you might do, Mrs. Gibson," advised Tom, after Cliff had read his card. "You just send some of the turkey out before Cliff gets a chance at it, so we'll be sure to have hash to-morrow."

"That won't be necessary," protested Cliff. "If you make Tom sit 'on the stair' there will certainly be enough left."

"See here, there isn't anything on this young lady's card," Mr. Gibson complained. Mardee sat next to him and he had reached out for her place card to read it.

"You write a verse for me, please, sir," pleaded Mardee.

Mr. Gibson took his pencil out of his pocket and scribbled on her card. Presently he handed it back to her. "Miss Mardee Gray" had been the

only words on it. Under them he had written three lines, and the question that met her gaze was:

"Miss Mardee Gray,
Why wouldn't you stay
When you went out to play
In the yard to-day?"

"Give me your pencil," commanded Mardee. She was in a versifying mood by that time and in a minute she had inscribed on the other side of the card:

"To stay out and play
I was perfectly ready,
Till a cow came that way —
She was sent by my Teddy."

"You're a little minx!" accused Mr. Gibson, his eyes twinkling.

"Now let me try my hand at Marilyn's," said Cliff. "She never has got her just deserts yet."

Marilyn's name was on her card, too. Cliff added to it and read aloud:

"Marilyn Gibson should make amends
For the rhymes she wrote about her friends;
Her mother should give just bread and water
To such an unregenerate daughter."

"Then you could have that much more turkey, couldn't you, Cliff?" suggested Tom sympathetically. "That's what made you think of that punishment, isn't it?"

The dinner was in many courses and lasted until

late in the day. Afterwards Mrs. Gibson and Rosemary took naps, and Mr. Gibson and "the youngsters", as he called them, played a game of ball to get up an appetite for the cold supper of left-overs. But when night came and the whole party gathered around the open fire of crackling logs, the long day of exercise in the outdoor air and the two hearty meals he had eaten began to tell upon Mr. Gibson. His face grew flushed and rosy and his sleepy eyes would drop shut. More than once his head fell forward and he waked with a sudden jerk.

"Will you excuse me now, ladies and gentlemen?" he said at last, with exaggerated formality. "I regret to be obliged to deprive myself of such excellent society, but I have an important appointment at the club."

"There isn't any club on Crow's Nest Mountain, is there, Marilyn?" asked Mardee, when their host had disappeared up the stairs.

"No. That is just Dad's foolish way of saying good night. He is going to bed."

"Let's serenade him," suggested Mardee.

"Help! Fire! Murder!" yelled Mr. Gibson's voice from the other side of the door when, as soon as an orchestra had been organized, Cliff sang "Oh, Mama, Pin a Rose on Me", to an accompaniment from the other three.

"Did you say 'Encore'?" asked Mardee through the keyhole.

"Bang!" a shoe hit the door.

The music began again, but when Cliff had sung "A Mother Was Chasing Her Boy Round the

Block" and "Oh, Der Liddle Augustine!" the choristers decided they had serenaded long enough and went to bed early themselves to be ready for the morrow, which would be their last day on Crow's Nest.

In the morning Mrs. Gibson found them all coming in from an early walk in the woods when she made her first appearance in the living-room.

"To-day is going to be another day like yesterday," she said, when greetings were over. "Instead of having the birds cooked for breakfast I had the cook make Cliff's turkey hash, and I thought we could have dinner outdoors somewhere and cook the birds over a bonfire."

"In the cave under the shoulder of the mountain!" assented Marilyn eagerly.

None of the others had ever heard of a cave under the shoulder of the mountain, though Mardee had been spending her summers on Crow's Nest ever since she could remember and the boys had hunted all over it for years.

"It's a sort of secret cave," explained Marilyn. "We found it by accident. It is in the cliffs over the river and the entrance to it is concealed by trees. You have to climb down a pretty steep slope to get there, but when you do you find a beautiful view of the river bend and the city."

The whole house party went out for the picnic dinner. They took the birds, cleaned and ready for cooking, and a lunch the servants had packed in baskets, and set out late in the morning to find the cave. By that time the autumn sunshine lay mellow and warm on the bright carpet of leaves

underfoot, and the placid sky overhead looked as blue and as deep as the ocean. The climb down the mountain side was steep, as Marilyn had said it would be, and by the time they had reached the cave they were almost at the foot of the mountain. A hundred feet below them a railroad track followed the river bank, and two hundred yards or so from the mouth of the cave a mountain torrent poured down its rocky bed and emptied itself into the river. An occasional glint of the water could be seen through the reds and yellows of the foliage, and the roar of the churning falls filled the still air with music.

"What a wonderful spot!" exclaimed Mardee, drawing a deep breath of rapture. Below them the tree tops spread a carpet of gorgeous hues at their feet, and beyond lay the lazy blue river and the spires of the city in a smoky haze.

"What a wonderful place for moonshiners!" Tom echoed her tone with a different sentiment. "You could pass within a stone's throw of this cave every day of your life and never know it was here."

"I have never been over to the stream to see those waterfalls at close range," said Mrs. Gibson.

"Come on, then. I'll go with you. There will be time now, and the mountain side will never look lovelier than it does to-day," said her husband. "We'll build the fire and walk over there while it is getting hot."

The boys accompanied them on their tour of exploration, but Rosemary complained that she

was tired, and Mardee and Marilyn stayed at the mouth of the cave with her.

"I wish we had not stayed here all alone," said Rosemary, when the others had passed out of sight through the flaming woods. "Tom has made me nervous talking about moonshiners."

"We can follow them if you want to," said Mardee, but Marilyn uttered a muffled shriek.

"There is a man on the other side of that underbrush!" she whispered. "I saw him part the bushes!"

"We should have to go that way to follow the others, too," Rosemary reminded them, looking in the direction Marilyn had indicated.

The three girls sat hugging their knees with their eyes glued on the spot where Marilyn had seen the man's face.

"What could we do if we were attacked?" asked Mardee in a low voice. "We haven't any weapons."

"I'd scream at the top of my lungs," declared Rosemary in a somewhat steadier tone. Having something to think about helped to allay her panic.

"A lot of good it would do you," derided Marilyn. "With the others on the bank of a roaring mountain torrent we might as well be mosquitoes buzzing this far away.—I have heard of women defending themselves with hatpins. But we haven't even any hatpins." She glanced despairingly at the soft sport hats pulled down over the ears of the other two.

"There is a butcher knife in that basket," suggested Mardee hopefully.

"And some table knives and forks," added Rosemary. "Oh, do you suppose they can have already taken Mother and Dad and the boys prisoners?"

They strained their eyes through the trees for what seemed an interminable length of time, and Rosemary frantically dug down in the baskets in search of the knives and forks.

When, after what was really only a short while, the other members of the party returned, they found the three girls armed to the teeth and suggesting by their equipment of cutlery cannibalistic intentions toward their victims.

But their white faces and state bordering on collapse were not a matter for joking, and Mrs. Gibson cried out in alarm:

"What's happened? Oh, girls, what is it?"

"Moonshiners," murmured Rosemary, weak from fright and nervous tension.

"We saw a man through the underbrush. He parted the leaves and looked at us," said Marilyn.

"Where?" asked Tom.

"Right there." Marilyn pointed to the spot.

"Nonsense, my dear — " Mr. Gibson was just about to declare that she must have been mistaken when the underbrush was pushed aside and a man holding some dead rabbits by the heels stepped through.

Rosemary gave a shriek, but Marilyn and Mardee gasped with relief, and the expressions on the boys' faces changed from alarm and curiosity to surprise at the sight of the intruder.

"Why, Roscoe Lawhead!" exclaimed Mardee.

They found the three girls armed to the teeth. *Page* 104.

"Where on earth did you come from?" asked Tom.

"What on earth do you mean by hanging around here?" demanded Mr. Gibson, putting his arm around his older daughter, who was laughing and crying hysterically.

"I hope you will excuse me for giving you such a scare," apologized the intruder. "I saw the smoke of your fire up here and came up to see what was the matter. When I saw it was a picnic party I turned back to go home but stopped to take these rabbits out of my traps and set the traps again. Then when I heard the young lady say she had seen me and thought I was a moonshiner, I thought I had better show myself so you wouldn't be frightened any more. I am awfully sorry, sir," he finished, addressing himself to Mr. Gibson.

"This is Roscoe Lawhead, the president of our class," Mardee introduced him.

"I did not realize that you were a friend of the young people's," said Mr. Gibson, in apology for the tone he had used before. "It's all right, you see, Rosemary. He didn't know you had seen him at first and was just getting rabbits out of his traps."

"Do you live near here?" asked Cliff.

"I live right down there on the other side of the trestle," Roscoe answered. "The stream there goes under the railroad track and flows into the river. Our house faces the railroad track just beyond the creek."

"I didn't know you were from Crow's Nest

Mountain," said Tom, and Mardee heard again Branch St. John's voice telling her at Miss Rhinebeck's party that his grandfather knew Roscoe's people and that they lived out on Crow's Nest Mountain.

"Yes, we have always lived here," Roscoe answered. "My father was a hand at the sawmill up the river — worked on the rafts in the spring, and kept a fishing boat of his own tied to the bank below here."

Mrs. Gibson invited him to stay and have dinner with them, but he thanked her and declined. Then he bade them good-by and departed, as he had come, through the thick brush under the trees.

Rosemary and the other two girls soon got over their fright, and Mardee declared that the broiled birds were good enough to make them forget all the rest of their troubles as well.

"Roscoe Lawhead will never know how near he came to sharing the fate of these quail," jibed Tom. "When I saw you three girls with a butcher knife handy and knives and forks all ready in your hands I was mighty careful about coming too close until I found out whom you were waiting for."

By that time even Rosemary was laughing, and before they had climbed up the mountain again she had entirely recovered from the effects of her nervousness.

They had to return early enough for the servants to shut up the cottage again, and before night they departed for the city in the two automobiles which had brought them.

CHAPTER IX

HALLOWE'EN

"L M SOME C," said Sally Cox mysteriously. It was Saturday morning, the last day in October, and the other S-B-double-M's had all dropped in at Sally's. They were usually to be found together somewhere on Saturdays, and this morning there was a special reason why Sally could not leave home.

"I know," Mardee answered her remark with a meaning look at the others, who nodded knowingly, but refrained from translating the cabalistic letters into words.

"C-a-n-d-y?" ventured Begorry, whereupon a certain little person who had been putting some dolls to bed in a corner rose up and faced them like Nemesis.

"C-a-n-d-y spells candy," said this small person pertly.

"Now, Begorry, you see what you have done!" raged Sally. The small person was Sally's younger sister.

"Drat the brat!" returned Begorry.

Sally's mother had gone down town, leaving Sally in charge of the younger children, of whom there were four. That was the reason Sally could not go to any of the other girls' houses.

The older girls, having disposed of Sally's little brothers successfully for the time being, had been making furtive attempts for some while to elude Bunch, the "brat" Begorry had referred to. But Bunch was gifted with an apparently artless but deadly persistence in sticking around.

"Now she'll give it away and the boys will all come piling back in and eat it up as fast as we can make it," Sally went on with her accusation, out of the wisdom of experience. The rationality of her complaint was supported by the appearance at the door of three eager boyish faces.

"Did Bunch say you were going to make some candy?" inquired one of the little brothers. Donald, Douglas, and David Cox came in between Sally and Bunch in age. There was a studious, bookish one, a merry, prankish one, and a frail one with adenoids and protruding teeth confined in a brace, but they were all alike in their fondness for candy and their ubiquitousness at candy-makings.

"Bunch said so, but that doesn't mean that we are," replied Sally in a tone of dismissal.

"Well, we'll smell it if you do," chirped Donald, the one with the brace on his teeth, and the three retired with a well-pleased air.

"We c m it a B's h," Sally proceeded with her mystic discourse. Her gestures served to make her meaning less obscure, but — alas — to the unwelcome little sister as well as to the others.

"I'll tell Mother on you if you go over to Begorry's," declared Bunch impishly. "She said for you to stay here with us until she got back."

Bunch was a pert and precocious youngster of five. Sally shrugged wearily.

"We might as well give it up," she sighed. "What shall we do?"

"Let's get up a play," suggested Marilyn.

"Oh, Marilyn, what a ripping idea!" "Oo-ooh, let's do!" "The very thing!" cried all three of the others at once.

"When shall we give it?" asked Begorry.

"Let's give it to-night to celebrate Hallowe'en," exclaimed Sally with a burst of inspiration.

"To-night! How on earth could we learn all the parts, or even find a play with just enough characters to go around, by to-night?" demanded Begorry. "It's ganiuses you must be thinking we are."

"It'll be easy," declared Sally calmly. "We can make up the play ourselves and put in a character apiece, and if we get the general idea of what the story is and what we ought to say at a given place in it, we won't need to write all the speeches out and learn them by heart."

Begorry was inclined to be skeptical but as usual was guided by Sally, and Sally outlined a story which she claimed would "act" splendidly.

"Prince Reginald Alexander Florizel — or something like that, you know — can be in love with Lady Georgianna Clarissa Higgenbotham — or some such name — but Sir Isaac Abraham Jacob Higgenbotham, the Lady Georgianna Clarissa's father, can oppose their love and try to force his daughter to marry the villain, Sir Hugo

Horatio Hottentot." As Sally got warmed up to her subject, her language flowed more and more smoothly and rapidly. The last long name fairly dripped off her tongue. "There are four parts right there, you see. And of course there ought to be a minister to marry them, but the villain wouldn't be in at the wedding, so he could put on a priest's robe over his other costume in that scene and one of us could take both those parts. We could call the minister Simon O'Rola and let Begorry take his part and the villain's — "

The other girls interrupted her inspired flow of words with a shout of laughter.

" — and there could be a little sister, Lady Tiny Pansy Higgenbotham, who could eavesdrop on all their conversations and report them to the irate father and Sir Hugo Horatio Hottentot," she continued undisturbed, with a severe look in her own little sister's direction. "That part would just suit Bunch. I'll get Mother to let her be in it. Bunch, you'll be wanted, for once."

"Where can we have it?" asked Begorry.

"We could have it in our storeroom," offered Mardee.

"That's just the very place. It's exactly the right shape," declared Sally. The S-B-double-M's were all familiar with the storeroom at the Grays', having more than once spent the night there all together. The Grays' home had no third story, but a long, low, ceiled room opening out of the clothes closet in Mrs. Gray's bedroom was used for storing trunks and unused furniture and went by the name of the storeroom. It had one

casement window in the far end and a projecting chimney halfway down its length which served to cut it in two parts and provide a corner for a stage dressing room. Besides a big, old-fashioned bed with a mended leg, which was furnished with springs and a mattress and was wide enough to accommodate three people comfortably and had more than once held four, it held a collection of old washstands, boxes, seatless chairs, broken mirrors, and a delectable assortment of rag bags and other odds and ends of which a lively imagination could make many uses. Mardee and Bab could not remember a time when they had not dragged the furniture of the storeroom about to make playhouses or set it all in straight rows to play school. It had been in turn studio, hospital, bazaar, Sunday school, church, and Pullman car. It had known many a spend-the-night party when all its old cots were pressed into service. It regularly served as a bedroom for Mardee and Bab when the arrival of company made of the front room a guest chamber. And now that it blossomed forth as a possible stage, there was no limit to the stage properties suggested by its fascinating contents.

"But who can we get for an audience on such short notice?" queried Begorry, who was still a doubting Thomas.

"I know!" cried Mardee. "Let's ask Mother to let Bab give a Hallowe'en party to-night. Bab can ask a lot of her friends, and they'll be the audience. Then we can all have sandwiches and lemonade afterwards for refreshments."

Mrs. Gray, consulted over the telephone, con-

sented to the plan on condition that the girls would make the sandwiches and lemonade themselves, and went into secret session with Barbara the minute she had hung up the receiver.

The S-B-double-M's spent a busy afternoon composing the play, assigning the parts, printing the programs, rehearsing, and arranging the theater. And quite unknown to them, all of Bab's friends and Mrs. Gray spent a busy afternoon as well.

Mardee and Marilyn arranged the theater while Sally printed the programs and Begorry made the tickets. The "bald-headed row" was the floor, the "parquet" was a semicircle of more or less crippled chairs, and the "peanut gallery" consisted of a varied assortment of boxes and washstands drawn up behind the chairs. Two cots placed close to the stage, one on either side of the "bald-headed row," served as boxes. The stage itself was made by hanging blankets across the end of the narrow room with a row of candles set in bottles for the footlights.

The programs conveyed the information that the part of Lady Georgianna Clarissa Higgenbotham would be taken by Miss Marilyn Gibson; that of Lady Tiny Pansy Higgenbotham, the heroine's little sister, by Miss Bunch Cox; Sir Isaac Abraham Jacob Higgenbotham, her irate father—"S. Cox"; the Reverend Simon O'Rola —"B. Gorham"; Prince Reginald Alexander Florizel—"M. Gray"; Sir Hugo Horatio Hottentot, "a most lewd and shameful villain" (à la Sally's "Boys' King Arthur")—"Begorry";

seconds in the duel, lords, ladies, chamberlains, and rabble — "members of the S-B-double-M Theatrical Company."

The costumes had to be prepared before supper time, too, but a search of Mrs. Gray's old trunks and rag bags yielded rich returns. A Persian lamb collar made a ferocious looking beard for Sir Isaac Abraham Jacob and the muff that matched it gave him a most terrifying head of hair.

"Just look at Isaacorski Abrahameski Jacobinski!" was Mardee's remark when Sally had got them on.

"Old Ivan the Terrible would suit her better for a name;" added Marilyn.

Lady Tiny Pansy was appealingly infantile in an old-fashioned tucked linen chemise and Lady Georgianna Clarissa herself was queenly in a pink satin relic of the days of trains and leg-o'-mutton sleeves. Marilyn, with her gorgeous hair piled high on her head and her complexion made up with paint, really did look lovely in the dim radiance cast by the candle footlights. Her perfection of feature was not detracted from by the thickness and roughness of her skin in a theatrical make-up, and the girls exclaimed over her beauty as an actress. Marilyn was visibly enraptured. Her delight in their praises served as an inspiration to her natural talents, and her spirited acting in the play surprised even the girls who had known her longest.

As soon as supper was over the performers began to arrive and disappear through Mrs. Gray's

closet into the storeroom, whence issued muffled shouts of laughter and many expeditions in search of pins, pencils, paste, water-color paints, and other mysterious supplies.

At eight o'clock, the hour named on the tickets for the performance to begin, the audience — including Seldom Fed, with ears erect and stump of a tail aquiver — arrived in a body at the theater door, and then the actors met with a surprise and the purport of Mrs. Gray's sessions with Bab and her friends became evident.

For every lady in the audience had a gentleman escort, and all were correctly attired in evening clothes. It is true that Doctor Gray was the only gentleman in the audience who ordinarily wore trousers, but gymnasium bloomers and the borrowed plumage of fathers and brothers supplied the lack in the wardrobes of the others, and canes and stiff collars furnished indisputable evidence of their manly estate. The ladies wore evening wraps which suspiciously resembled kimonos in some cases, and carried bouquets which might have trimmed hats in Sally's "d d d b r." Some of them carried opera glasses made of jelly glasses or little round vases tied together, and one couple came to the theater in a perambulator "limousine" which stood waiting for them at the door. Doctor Gray entertained a box party on one of the cots, consisting of "Miss Lizzie Gray" and her chaperone, to make everything perfectly proper.

The play itself was a bloodcurdling spectacle. The villain could scarcely see out from under his eyebrows and stalked about fiercely with his arms

folded on his chest and his chin buried in his collar, muttering enough "'Sdeaths!" and "'Od's bodikins!" to make up for any other deficiencies in his conversation. Handsome Prince Florizel gallantly carried a rapier which had once done duty as a curtain rod and made the most ardent love to Lady Georgianna Clarissa. And how the lady reciprocated! But the tale-bearing little sister ("true to form," Sally muttered into her beard) reported all their words to the cruel tyrant, her father, who insisted upon her marrying the villain, and Prince Florizel and Lady Georgianna had many trials to remain faithful through.

There were two acts, and the only member of the audience who was bored was Seldom Fed. He lay at his master's feet with his nose on his paws and audibly snored. The others, however, hissed the villain and wept with the heroine and applauded Prince Florizel's defiance to Sir Isaac until the peanut gallery tipped over on the parquet and the parquet stepped on the hands of the bald-headed row, and the curtain got pushed into the footlights with an awful odor of burning wool which wrung from "Miss Lizzie Gray" in her box a cry of "Oh, my blankets!" and Seldom Fed, aroused from his dreams, sprang stiff-legged to all four feet and added his furious barking to the general commotion. But when the footlights had been set back and Seldom Fed had been ignominiously ejected and the door closed upon him, Lady Georgianna Clarissa took up her impassioned speech of grief where she had left off when the excitement began.

In the last act everybody was murdered but the father and the Reverend Simon O'Rola, and for an encore they all got up and went through a double wedding, with the father in the priest's robes this time, the villain making amends for his "lewdness and shamefulness" by taking unto himself the little sister for a wife, and Prince Florizel and Lady Georgianna Clarissa falling into each other's arms to the deep content of every one.

After the play the audience crowded around the performers to offer felicitations. Bunch was so excited by the compliments for Lady Tiny Pansy Higgenbotham that she capered about like a spring lamb until Sally took her by the hand in disgust and led her, protesting, from the storeroom. In Mardee's bedroom, where her protests took the form of sobs, she soon cried herself to sleep, and spent the rest of the evening covered up on the bed.

Marilyn was the recipient of the heartiest congratulations. Not only the audience, but her fellow-players waxed enthusiastic over her performance.

"Gibs, you ought to go on the stage," said Sally. They had all flocked to the kitchen to make the sandwiches and lemonade, and Sally was standing on a chair in the middle of the room, toasting marshmallows at the gas jet over her head and popping them into the girls' mouths by turns.—"Here's yours, Begorry.—When we see Marilyn's name flashing out in electric lights across Broadway one of these days, we'll all say, 'I acted with

her in her first play. Ah, them was good old days!' "

"D d d b r," sighed Marilyn lugubriously, wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye, and Sally sobbed convulsively as she spitted another marshmallow on the pin.

"And faith and bejabbers, Gibs, yez do look foine with that paint on," Begorry added her bit to the chorus of praise.

"Yes. It helps my looks to hide my complexion, I know," replied Marilyn. She was a queer, sensitive girl. Perhaps Begorry's compliment had been tactless, but she had meant well, and Marilyn's tone was so bitter as to embarrass the other girls.

"Let's tell some ghost stories," suggested trusty little Bab, sensing the situation and trying to change the subject. The last sandwich and the last marshmallow and the last drop of lemonade were just about to disappear.

"Yes, let's!" assented Sally, hopping down off her stool. "We must turn off the lights and sit on the floor in the firelight to make them really effective."

"Sally, you know there's not an open fire in the house," objected Mardee.

"Well, we can sit around the stove in the dining-room, then, in the light from the isinglass doors."

"Br-r-r-r-r!" shivered Begorry with chattering teeth, when Mardee had put out the light and they were left in the very dim radiance from the stove. Doctor and Mrs. Gray had gone upstairs and the girls had the lower floor to themselves.

"Sally, you tell first," said Mardee.

"How many know the story of Old Man Grimes?" asked Sally.

"I don't! I don't!" came from all around the circle.

"Well, then, listen! This is a true story. I am going to harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, cause thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres, and thy knotted and combined locks to part and each combined hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porcupine!"

"Just listen to Lune!" interrupted Begorry admiringly.

"That's Shakespeare. You never heard of him," replied Sally patronizingly.

"She had to learn it at school," explained Marilyn in a hasty aside. She had recovered from her ill temper.

"Well, anyway," Sally proceeded, "Old Man Grimes lived a bad life — "

"A 'lewd and shameful life'?" one of the younger girls quoted from the programmes.

"Exactly. Just like Sir Hugo Horatio Hottentot, as I laughed and told Begorry. He cussed and swore and drank and played cards — "

"And rolled bones," interrupted Marilyn.

"And whispered in class," giggled Mardee, thereby suggesting a chorus of other crimes:

"And shuffled his feet in chapel."

"And didn't pay attention."

"And didn't stand straight in line."

"And stamped too heavily on the stairs."

"And didn't respond promptly to the assembly bell."

"Well, he lived an awful life like that," resumed Sally, "and finally he died and was buried. One night two of his old cronies were cronying around, and one of them said to the other:

" 'I bet you wouldn't be game to go out to the cemetery and see what Old Man Grimes is doing.'

"The other one said he would, and so they went out to the cemetery. It was just exactly midnight. And they stooped down on the grave and called:

" 'Old Man Grimes! Old Man Grimes! What are you doing down there?'

"And Old Man Grimes answered: 'Nothing at a-a-all! Nothing at a-a-all!' "

Sally's voice had been hollow as a sepulcher in telling the whole story. She ended on a low, shuddering moan that very nearly did to her hearers what she had promised them in the matter of harrowing up their souls, freezing their young blood, and the like. The pause that followed was impressive.

And just at that moment there was a long, reverberating ring at the doorbell.

Every girl in the room jumped convulsively. Some of them gasped, some of them caught at each other.

"Oh, what can it be?" whispered Mardee.

"No way to find out without going to the door," remarked practical Bab, in a casual tone of voice that did much to restore the sinking courage of the other girls.

"Somebody come with me," begged Mardee.

Armed with the gas lighter to turn up the hall light, and followed timidly by the whole troop of girls, she ventured to the door and opened it.

Outside, on the porch, stood a ghastly visitor. The skeleton of a horse, strengthened and propped up by a collection of broomsticks and rusty pokers, stood gleaming in the radiance from the open door.

One or two of the girls shrieked, but a bolder one said, "Some of the boys did it," and suppressed snorts from below the porch steps seemed to confirm the suspicion.

"Let's put on sheets and slip down there and scare them," whispered Sally.

Mardee hastened upstairs and came back with half a dozen sheets borrowed from Mrs. Gray's linen closet.

Sally and Marilyn and Mardee, and Bab and two of the younger girls, seized upon the sheets and wrapped themselves in them, and when Begorry begged Sally to let her get in the sheet with her, every sheet was made to do double duty and an awkward company of ghosts stood ready to go down the porch steps.

"You might as well come out and show yourselves!" warned Mardee in a threatening voice, and they started off on tiptoe. Down the steps they went and off the cement walk toward a clump of shrubbery on the lawn. They were keeping all together, in spite of their bold front.

Just as they reached the shadowy clump in the corner of the lawn six or eight forms shot up

from behind the bushes and a chorus of terrifying voices shouted:

"Boo!"

The ghosts who had come out to spread terror all about gave every evidence of being terrified. They turned tail and retreated in disorder. In some cases one wearer of a sheet fled faster than her companion and pulled the ghostly robe off the other girl as she ran. What with racing feet and waving arms, every ghost was a flapping scarecrow.

But Seldom Fed, who had heretofore been lying quietly on his rug in the back hall, became affected by the contagion of excitement and was aroused to defend his household. He rushed out of the door and to the center of the lawn, where he stood with all four feet braced wide apart, barking furiously at the shrubbery. Once or twice he made such alarming dashes in the direction whence issued certain muffled sounds that the stealthy visitors were obliged to come out in the open and hold friendly converse with Seldom for their own safety.

"Nice old Seldom!" said some one. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you, Seldom?"

"That's Don!" gloated Mardee. "I thought he was out there!"

"And there's Branch St. John," announced Marilyn.

"And Ed McKie," said Begorry.

It turned out to be a crowd of Freshman boys, and upon the girls' invitation they came inside and joined the circle around the dining-room stove.

"Where on earth did you boys get that awful thing?" demanded Sally, indicating the direction of the skeleton horse.

"From the city dumping ground," the boys confessed.

They stayed until the arrival of the fathers and mothers for their daughters broke up the Hallowe'en party, and in the morning they returned to cart away the bones of the skeleton horse.

CHAPTER X

A SECRET AND A QUARREL

On Sunday afternoon Don Willis vaulted the two intervening porch railings and made his appearance in the Grays' parlor.

Sunday was a popular calling day in Channingsburg, and Mardee and Bab between them usually had a houseful of callers.

"I can't come into my own home on Sunday without having a dozen youngsters underfoot," Doctor Gray complained. Heretofore it had been mainly the younger boys of the girls' own ages who had come in bunches, shuffling with small-boy awkwardness, swinging their arms and legs, and indulging in boisterous pranks at each other's expense. But this year Mardee had begun to consider herself a young lady. Since Tom Adair and Cliff Nash had become her good friends, more and more of the older boys in the high school had begun calling on her. Some of the younger ones were frightened away by the presence of the big fellows, but there was still Bab for them to come to see, and some, like Don Willis, were not so easily put out of countenance.

On the Sunday after Hallowe'en Tom Adair and Cliff Nash were already ensconced in two of

the parlor chairs with Mardee hemmed up in a corner before them when Don came in.

"Ho there, Kid! You can't come in," was their cordial reception of the newcomer.

"Who says so?" inquired Don, with the boldness of an old and familiar friend.

"We blackballed you," announced Tom cheerfully.

"I bet Mardee voted for me, anyway. Didn't you, Mardee?"

"Mardee can't vote. She is president of this club and hasn't a vote," declared Cliff. A course in Civil Government and the class elections had given the pupils of the high school a fair knowledge of parliamentary law.

"Well, I propose my name again," said Don.

"I blackball it."

"I blackball it."

Thus both the others in one breath.

"Try it once more," pleaded Don.

But they both blackballed it as promptly as before.

"I'll tell you what I can do for you, Don," cried Mardee, seized with a happy inspiration. "I'll propose the names of Bab and Davy, and when they are members they will both vote for you and that will make a tie and I'll have to cast my vote!"

Bab and Davy Wright, a boy of her own age, were popping corn in the grate across the room.

"We'll have to vote on them first," Tom reminded her darkly, and when Mardee proposed their names with much ceremony, Bab was

elected to membership but Davy was blackballed.

"Davy, you and I will form a rival club," said Don, "and try to amalgamate."

But although there was no opposition from Tom and Cliff to the amalgamation, poor Don was no sooner a member than he discovered the reason for their complaisance.

"I move that we expel Don for incompatibility," said Cliff.

"Second the motion," said Tom.

"We have to vote on it," urged Mardee.

The vote was a tie and the weight of Mardee's presidential ballot gave Don a majority that kept him in the club. His first act as a member was to move that Messrs. Adair and Nash go home, but Tom promptly moved that his motion be laid on the table. Finally, after the motion had been tabled twice and carried twice, Tom and Cliff departed, vowing that if they could not keep undesirables out of the club they would resign, and Mardee and Don proceeded to help Davy and Bab eat up the popcorn.

Sunday afternoons were a subject for confidential comparisons among the girls at school on Mondays.

"How many callers did you have?" they asked each other. Of late Mardee's total had been breaking all records and the other S-B-double-M's pretended to be crushed with envy.

As a matter of fact, Marilyn Gibson was the only one who really cared. But Marilyn's disposition was peculiar. She had allowed that misfortune of a rough and coarsened skin to embitter

her whole nature. It really was a sad affliction for a young girl to bear, for people could not help noticing so glaring a defect, and with her lovely hair and good features and build she narrowly missed being a beauty. Marilyn raged impotently and made no effort to control a growing cynicism and jealousy of the other girls,— and especially of Mardee, since Mardee was the prettiest of her close friends. It was Marilyn's own fault that she was not popular. If she had only been able to see that in Sally's case not even actual homeliness prevented her from being one of the best-liked girls in their set she might have been less self-conscious and sensitive. Instead, she was convinced that it was Mardee's growing comeliness rather than her sweet and unaffected cordiality that made friends for her so easily, and in consequence she held a secret grudge against her so deep down in her heart as to be half unsuspected by herself.

"How many, Mardee?" she asked as they came out of school together Monday afternoon.

Mardee understood that she meant "How many callers yesterday?" for Marilyn took a perverse satisfaction in the evidences of her friend's superiority in the line of her own ambitions.

"Not many. Business was sort of dull yesterday," laughed Mardee, from a kind instinct not to outshine as a rival. "Oh, Marilyn," she added, from the same kind impulse, "you did look so sweet in the play Saturday night. Really you have talent as an actress."

"And before the footlights my complexion

doesn't make so much difference," said Marilyn, with the same bitterness of tone she had used in speaking to Begorry the night of the play. "I can put on enough paint and powder to hide it."

"Oh, Marilyn, please don't take it that way," begged Mardee. "You ought not to imagine yourself so homely."

"I don't," laughed Marilyn frankly, with the note of hard cynicism that kept her friends at a distance. "It is only my skin that is ugly, but that is the first thing people see when they look me in the face. Honestly, Mardee, I might be pretty if it were not for that."

"You are pretty, Marilyn," insisted Mardee, pitying the pain that could make any one speak so ungirlishly.

"No, I am not," replied Marilyn with pitiless honesty. "But I do take a pretty photograph.—I'll tell you a secret if you'll cross your heart you'll never breathe it to a living soul." The two girls were walking together. There were groups before and behind them, but no one within hearing distance.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," promised Mardee in the glib formula always used.

"I am going to be a moving-picture actress."

"You could do that splendidly, Gibs!" cried Mardee with enthusiasm.

"I know I could act if I tried, and on the screen my complexion would make less difference than anywhere else."

"Will you go to a dramatic school when you finish the high school?" asked Mardee.

"I am going to try to break into the movies right away. That's the secret. You promise you won't tell?"

Mardee repeated her formula.

"Well, Franklin S. Foote"—the name of a noted moving-picture producer—"is conducting a beauty contest in the newspapers all over the country. He will make the prize winner a star, and the girls in this region can send their photographs to *The Channingsburg Times.* I am going to send mine in, and if it is selected by the judges, I will leave school right away and go to California. You know youth counts for a great deal on the stage and I'd want to begin right away to have as long a career as possible.— And, oh, Mardee, just think of the fortune I should make and the millions of people who could see my good points without ever knowing what a fright I really am!"

Mardee was at a loss for an answer. Her good sense told her that it would be a foolish thing for Marilyn to leave school, even if she could win in a nation-wide beauty contest, and she was amazed at her friend's assurance that she would be selected by the great producer. Also, she knew what Mrs. Gibson's feeling would be about her little girl's sending her photograph to strangers for possible publication. Marilyn noticed her hesitation and jumped to the uncharitable conclusion that Mardee meant to enter the beauty contest, too.

"I suppose you'll try for it, too?" she said suspiciously.

"Why, Marilyn Gibson, I wouldn't do such a thing for anything!" protested Mardee.

"What's wrong with doing such a thing, I'd like to know?" inquired Marilyn pointedly, as if bent upon putting an unfriendly interpretation upon any words Mardee might say.

"I meant I wouldn't enter any contest in the hope of beating you," explained Mardee, determined to be friends.

"Well, why don't you act like you want me to beat, then?"

Again Mardee felt embarrassed.

"Say what you think," the wise little inner counselor that will guide any one who will let it whispered into her ear.

"Well — just to be frank, Marilyn, I don't believe your mother would let you send your photograph to the *Times* if she knew about it. Nor your father, either."

"Of course Mother wouldn't. Dad always lets me do anything I want to. But I sha'n't ask either one of them, though," Marilyn replied, with the light cynical laugh that Mardee always found so unpleasant.

"They wouldn't let you leave school if you won the contest, either, would they?" continued Mardee, doubtfully.

"Don't suppose Mother would. And she's boss," answered Marilyn, with the same assumption of airiness. "But I guess my life is my own to live, and she would be glad enough to have me a famous artist."

There was another long pause.

"Well, is that all the interest you can take in your friends' ambitions, Mardee?" asked Marilyn at last.

"Oh, Marilyn, I'm so sorry! And I hate to seem goody goody, but if I were you I wouldn't do anything without telling my mother. I have always told Mother everything — she is so much wiser than I."

Marilyn was plainly offended and Mardee was much troubled in her mind when they parted at the corner where Mardee had to turn off on her way home. Her first thought was to carry the trouble to her mother, and she sought her out the minute she got into the house.

Mrs. Gray was in the back yard, helping Lighty to take down the clothes the laundress had left hanging on the line to dry, and Mardee went out to lend a hand and pour the whole story into her ears. It was literally true, as she had told Marilyn, that she "always told Mother everything," and she had no thought of giving away a confidence when she shared it with her mother. Mother had always helped her to keep the girls' secrets.

"Her mother certainly ought to know of it," said Mrs. Gray, with her mouth full of clothespins. "If girls would always talk things over with their mothers," she went on, taking the clothespins out of her mouth and dropping them into her apron pocket, "they would save themselves from so many mistakes and from so much that puts them in a false light. As for you, I don't see that you said anything that need have hurt her feelings,

and I am sure that if you continue to be friendly the trouble between you will soon blow over."

Meanwhile Marilyn wrapped up her photograph and took it to the post office to stamp and mail. The lady who sold her the stamps was a Miss Daisy Long who had been a schoolmate of Marilyn's mother in the days when Channingsburg was a village. In spite of the difference in their present stations the two still called each other by their first names and felt a friendly interest in each other's intimate affairs. She noticed the address on Marilyn's package and putting two and two together guessed what was in it.

But instead of saying anything to Marilyn she telephoned to her old friend that night and asked her if she were going to let her daughter compete in the *Times*-Foote beauty contest.

"Why, certainly not," answered Mrs. Gibson. "I can answer without knowing which daughter you mean. But did you have Rosemary or Marilyn in mind?"

"Marilyn," answered Miss Long.

"The idea! What could have put such a thing into your head, Daisy? The child is so unformed and angular yet that she could not stand a chance of winning, and the thing would naturally be distasteful to me, anyway. I wouldn't permit either one of them to submit her photograph in a public contest."

"Well, I didn't think so, Mamie."

"What made you ask, then?" inquired Mrs. Gibson, puzzled.

"I think Marilyn mailed her picture to the

Times to-day, and I thought you would want to know — with the chances of its being published, and all. But don't tell her I told you. She wouldn't understand, and I don't want to get into her bad graces."

"Marilyn, is it true that you sent your photograph to the *Times* in this Franklin S. Foote contest?" asked Mrs. Gibson, none too tactfully, the minute she left the telephone.

"Was that Mrs. Gray telephoning you?" asked Marilyn, jumping at another sudden conclusion.

"Never mind who it was. She asked me not to say —" began Mrs. Gibson.

"Then I *know* it was. And I know why she didn't want you to tell me who it was," stormed Marilyn, her face dark with anger.

She could hardly wait for Tuesday morning to accuse Mardee of not keeping her secret. She went to school early and awaited Mardee's arrival. Mardee came in with Sally and Begorry.

"Mardee, may I speak to you alone?" asked Marilyn.

"No secrets allowed in the S-B-double-M's," sang out Sally good-naturedly, but a glance at Marilyn's angry face was enough to inform her that there had been some quarrel between her and Mardee.

"Did you tell anybody that I was going to send in my photograph to the *Times*-Foote beauty contest?" Marilyn demanded, when she and Mardee had started around the walk to the back yard.

"No —" began Mardee, and then the thought of Mrs. Gray saying, "Her mother certainly

ought to know of it" with her mouth full of clothespins suddenly silenced her. "That is, nobody but Mother, and I don't think she would have repeated it. She never does."

"You promised me, and you crossed your heart and hoped to die, that you wouldn't tell anybody what I told you, and then you went straight and told your mother —"

"But I always tell Mother everything! I told you that yesterday. When I promise to keep a secret I don't mean I will have secrets from her. But she would be just as careful of your confidence as I."

"Just as careful as you!" quoted Marilyn derisively. "She was. She telephoned my mother all about it last night."

"She did not!" stormed Mardee.

"She certainly did. Who else could have done it? I didn't tell a soul but you."

"I'd be willing to swear she didn't," insisted Mardee.

"Well, that isn't the question, anyhow," answered Marilyn. "The real question is whether *you* told or not, and you did. I'll never trust you again as long as I live."

CHAPTER XI

BOOKS, BASKETBALL, AND A BAND

Mardee went home after school in tears, but she was comforted by her mother and father.

"The untrustworthy girl is usually the one who does not confide in her mother," pronounced Doctor Gray, and when Mardee had learned beyond a doubt that it was not Mrs. Gray who had telephoned to Marilyn's mother, she felt better.

The other S-B-double-M's did not take sides with either one, for neither Marilyn nor Mardee was willing to tell what the trouble was. Sensitive Marilyn did not wish to have her moving-picture project generally known, and Mardee could not make any explanations without doing what Marilyn had accused her of,—violating a confidence. The four were together just as much as usual, but the feeling of coolness caused a constraint that every one was conscious of.

Marilyn seemed determined to put Mardee at a disadvantage and to put the worst interpretation on any of Mardee's acts that could possibly be taken as a slight.

In November Mardee's Uncle Theodore, her mother's brother, who had a farm in Ohio and spent a part of each year in Florida, passed through Channingsburg on his way to his winter

home. Uncle Theodore's visits were always occasions to be looked forward to. In the first place, he had a daughter Judie who was Mardee's age; in the second place, he came in a mammoth touring car which was the last word in automobile luxury and was very generous with rides during his stay in Channingsburg; in the third place Aunt Harriet, his wife, was a sort of female Santa Claus, whose baggage was as full of presents as the good old Christmas saint's pack; and besides all that, Uncle Theodore had a delectable way of stopping his twelve-cylinder leviathan in front of the stores downtown to ask his nieces, "Is there anything you want in here?" and supplying imaginary wants if they did not mention something definite.

This year Uncle Theodore wanted to go out to see the army post a few miles from Channingsburg but Aunt Harriet felt too tired after their long trip to take the ride.

"Harriet and I will stay at home," said Mrs. Gray, "and Ned and the children can go with Theodore."

"There will be room in the car for three more. Mardee, haven't you some little friends who would enjoy the ride out to the post?" Uncle Theodore asked of Mardee, who happened to be at hand.

A word to the wise was sufficient. Away flew Mardee to the telephone and called up all three of the other S-B-double-M's. Sally and Begorry eagerly accepted, but she could not get any answer over Marilyn's 'phone.

Later, when Marilyn learned of the visit to the post and that she was the only S-B-double-M who had not gone, she assumed an injured air. Mardee tried to explain that she had had only a few minutes' notice and that no one answered the telephone at Marilyn's home.

"The servants must be getting very careless. When I tell Mother she will certainly raise Cain with them," Marilyn replied, but her manner plainly showed that she did not think Mardee had done her best to reach her.

That was just an example of her attitude in many small matters. Mardee's feeling that Marilyn sought to place her at a disadvantage received frequent confirmation. She was uncomfortably aware that Marilyn never failed to ascribe to her words a meaning that made them seem less friendly or less sincere than they were intended to be, if she could. Mardee, who was peace-loving by nature, instinctively ignored her barbed shafts and never replied in kind, but naturally she did not seek Marilyn's society and the good times with Cliff and Tom as well as with the S-B-double-M's were interfered with.

It was well for Mardee Ant that they were. Mardee, in Tom's society, was always inclined to be Mardee Grasshopper. It was the Grasshopper characteristics that he admired most in her, and most appealed to. Her pretty face, her love of fun, her delight in frivolous nonsense,— those were the things that Tom found attractive. And his chivalrous homage, his ready appreciation of pretty clothes, and buoyant good comradeship

were at the bottom of Mardee's liking for him. When she and Tom and Cliff and Marilyn were together a great deal of the time, studying seemed a dull business and the routine of classes and everyday occupations humdrum and boring.

But in the revulsion of feeling her quarrel with Marilyn brought about, Mardee stopped and took stock of herself. She perceived that Mardee Grasshopper, ever since the Lakemont game, had had the upper hand over Mardee Ant. She saw that she had been less thorough in her work than before then, and that unless she went back over the lessons and studied them more systematically she could not get grades high enough to make her eligible for the Davis medal.

The reports issued at the end of each month showed that Mardee had a good chance to win the medal if she kept on as she had begun. A number of Freshmen out of different city grammar schools were possible candidates for the honor. Sally Cox had excellent grades and referred to herself as "the company" in "Geniuses and Co." But Mardee's most formidable rivals were Branch St. John and Roscoe Lawhead. At the end of each month a comparison of report cards showed that those three averages — Mardee's, Branch's, and Roscoe's — remained about the same. If Mardee beat Branch in English, then Branch would beat Mardee in Geometry and Roscoe's mark in Physics would be higher than either of the others, though not so high, perhaps, in Latin. The grades of the three were a seesaw which preserved upon the whole an even balance.

During the weeks immediately after the Lakemont game — the giddy, gay weeks of Marilyn's houseparty and Hallowe'en — other things had crowded the Davis medal out of Mardee's mind. Mardee Grasshopper had been dancing in the sunshine of fun and frolic. But after the trouble with Marilyn a serious, stubborn little Mardee Ant set to work storing up knowledge for the coming examinations.

"Mardee Grasshopper gets me into all the trouble I ever get into," Mardee confessed during the stock-taking that preceded Mardee Ant's activities. "If I had been pegging away at this Latin and Geometry I should have been so much more interested in them that I shouldn't have cared so much about Marilyn's snippishness — or at any rate I should have had something I could turn to for comfort. As it is, I feel that they are strangers to me and I have to make friends of them."

Fortunately Uncle Theodore's visit came just at the right time to lighten the gloom into which remorse and desperate resolve had plunged conscientious Mardee Ant.

Uncle Theodore's visits were always larks for Mardee and Bab. There were only two bedrooms in the Grays' little home and when guests came the two girls had to move their possessions into the storeroom and convert the front bedroom into a guest chamber. For any one else they were inclined to go grumblingly. The long, low, ceiled room was icy cold in winter without any fireplace and smothering hot in summer with its

one square casement window tucked under the sun-warmed roof. Many a time had they complained that the bare boards of the storeroom floor gave them chilblains in winter and burned their toes on Tuesday nights in summer, after a long day of ironing in the sweltering kitchen below,— but only when the guests for whom they had given up their own room were less welcome than Uncle Theodore and his family. Very cheerfully they moved for them. And Judie always went with them and seemed to consider sleeping on one of the cots in the storeroom, or, better still, sandwiched in between her two cousins in the wide old crippled bed, more fun than anything else she did on her yearly Florida trip. Usually all three slept curled up together under the quaint old quilts which belonged on the storeroom bed.

Judie was small, dark-eyed, sharp of feature, and pert in manner, a strong contrast to her two round-faced cousins. But she was full of a nervous staccato animation and always eager for a good time, and her shrill delight in everything that offered made her visits an exciting round of pleasure. This fall Uncle Theodore's arrival coincided with one of the biggest basketball games of the high school season.

"I hadn't intended to go," Mardee confessed to her cousin. "I am studying awfully hard for some tests next week and had declined two invitations. But with you here to go, too, I sha'n't be able to resist. I think I'll holler to Don to let us three girls go down with him. I know the other

boys who asked me to go will understand."

Don, duly "hollered" to, was most cordial.

"Sure thing! Come along. Ain't I the lucky dog?" he replied in his very worst English before the company. "Haven't any more cousins for me to take, have you?" he inquired when he appeared at the door to escort them.

"Do you like the sample?" asked Judie, making a saucy face at him.

"Fine!" he answered.

The high school basketball team was to play the Channingsburg Athletic Club team on their own gymnasium floor in the Armory. There were several basketball organizations in the city and the school team had a full schedule, but this C. A. C. team was its most formidable rival. It was made up of young clerks and business boys who were in the average older and heavier than the high school boys. The C. H. S. team had, however, come out victorious in one encounter between the two on the court in the high school gymnasium.

"But we feel less confident of our ability to beat them on their own floor," Don explained, on the way down to the Armory.

"I'll help root with all my might, if you think that will do any good," offered Judie in staccato fashion,—not noisy, but nevertheless shrill.

"Be sure you do—of course it will," Don said, laughing.

At the door of the Armory they met the high school band just arriving in a body.

"Boys, this is my cousin Judie. She's going

to root for us to-night," Mardee said in playful introduction.

"Hurrah for Cousin Judie! Boys, let's give her a serenade!" Ed McKie acknowledged the formality as spokesman for the entire aggregation.

"Oh, do!" cried Mardee eagerly. "Play 'Funiculi Funicula' for her. You do that splendidly."

"Come on, boys! My drum is upstairs but this will do, I reckon," and Ed jerked a stick off the side of a wooden crate on the curbstone and beat on an iron mailbox. Don and the girls shuffled their feet in time to the music, and what with that and with Ed's enthusiastic if unmusical accompaniment on the mail box they had soon collected a crowd around them that looked like a Salvation Army meeting.

"Now! Nine 'rahs for the high school!" proposed Mardee, when "Funiculi Funicula" was finished, and with a rousing cheer the meeting broke up.

"What a spooky old place this is," said Judie, shivering, as they started up the stairs. Two flights of narrow dirty stairs led up through bare and dimly lighted corridors painted a dismal cold gray and further darkened with innumerable cobwebs and flyspecks. The assembly hall which the C. A. C. used as a court was on the top floor.

The Armory was in fact a "spooky" old place. The building was almost as old as Channingsburg itself. Situated near the river, in the oldest part of the town, it had stood there since the

town was little more than an Indian trading post and had no means of communicating with the outer world save by water. It had probably been intended for a warehouse in the first place, but in different periods of the city's history had served as church, auditorium, playhouse, jail, military headquarters during the Civil War, and now armory for the state militia. Additions had been made at random to fit it for its various rôles and the result was a curious architectural hodge-podge with floors on different levels, walls of varying thicknesses, and gables of divers patterns.

"'Spooky' is the right word," agreed Don. "Did you know, Mardee, that twenty years or so ago, when they were tearing down a part of this building for repairs, they found a double wall with a skeleton in between?"

"Mercy, no! Could they tell how it got there?" asked Mardee, while Judie hugged herself and uttered little shrieks of pretended terror.

"No. Nobody knew anything about it, and there wasn't any way to find out so long afterward. He had on a Yankee uniform and must have been there since the war between the States."

Don's grandfather had fought in the Confederate army, and no real Southerner will speak of the war with the Northern States as a "civil war."

"But a double wall! How funny," persisted Mardee.

Don continued, "There are a lot of funny

things about this old shack. It doesn't follow any plan and I don't suppose there is anybody that could find his way all over it."

"Oh, please let's explore it," shrilled Judie, always eager for a new sensation.

Bab added a hearty second to her plea and Mardee gave a trembling consent. With Don in the lead and Judie close at his heels, the four went from floor to floor, trying doors and finding them locked or poking their heads into dark empty rooms, some of them spectrally lighted by skeleton windowpanes outlined against the dim radiance from the street, others without even this illumination and so dark that they literally could not see their hands before their faces when they tried. They followed narrow cross passages leading to more dirty lamp-lighted halls and stairways; they heard men's voices beyond some doors and refrained from opening them, and three times they descended by different stairs to the street. One of these street entrances was near an alley.

"I'll dare anybody to go up that dark alley," said Judie. They had been daring each other to go into the dim rooms and allow the door to be shut from the outside, and no one had been bold enough to take the dare. Even stout-hearted Bab had succumbed to Judie's trumped-up terror.

"Pshaw! I'll do that," declared Don and Bab in one breath. "I'll be game to go if you'll all go with me," said Mardee.

Hand in hand they felt their way along the alley wall.

"Here's a door," announced Judie in a sepulchral voice intended to raise goose flesh on the others.

"Dare you to open it," said Bab, who was recovering her normal matter-of-factness.

Judie turned the knob and drew the others in after her. They could feel some more stairs — narrow ones, between two brick walls — and huddling together, they mounted them. At the top they came face to face with another door in the dark. They could feel the knob.

Judie asked, "Who's game to open this?"

Bab put her hand on the knob.

"Look out! I bet that skeleton's right on the other side," Don whispered in a hoarse note of warning. Bab's newly recovered courage deserted her. Don himself was affected by the panic he had aroused in the others. All four tumbled pell-mell down the stairs and through the alley and out into the street once more. Not until they found themselves in the bright lights of the C. A. C. club rooms, where the basketball game was beginning, did their breath come naturally again.

Then they looked at one another and laughed, sheepish but relieved.

"Want to explore any more, Judie?" Don asked.

"No — thanks!" exploded Judie very positively.

But whatever the oddities of the building, it boasted the best dancing floor in town in the long room on the top story. It was large enough, too,

to accommodate a great many people. There was a large crowd gathered about the basketball court, but after the game — which, by the way, ended in a defeat for the high school boys, who promptly rechallenged their rivals — when the gathering was turned into a dance there was plenty of space for the dancers, in spite of the chairs of those not dancing.

Tom Adair had spied Mardee early in the evening. He and Cliff were both on the team and Mardee yelled herself hoarse in cheering them, egged on by Judie's excited efforts. As soon as the game was over she explained to Tom how she happened to be there — for Tom was one of the two who had asked her to come and been refused — and introduced Judie to him. He asked Mardee for the first dance and made an engagement for the second with Judie, who was to dance the first with Don.

"I wish our high school gym were as large as this, don't you?" Mardee asked Tom, as they glided around the big room without colliding with any one in spite of the number of couples on the floor.

Tom answered, "I was just thinking of that. We will have to rent this room for our own big affairs in the spring."

Mardee told him of the ghostly tour of exploration and they had a hearty laugh together over it.

"And now how about to-morrow night?" asked Tom. "Hasn't getting out to-night broken the spell? Won't you be ready for a little more fun?"

But Mardee shook her head. Judie would be leaving to-morrow. And Mardee Ant stuck to her guns, pegging away at Latin and geometry and physics and English and history until she had caught up and was able to pass the monthly tests with flying colors.

CHAPTER XII

OF A NUMBER OF THINGS

Thanksgiving followed the November tests, and after Thanksgiving Christmas came on with a rush. It seemed to Mardee that it was still a long way off when December began, but the weeks were so filled with school work and Christmas preparations that the calendar seemed fairly to melt away toward the twenty-fifth.

In the first place, there were the Christmas examinations staring her in the face. Of course, after the work she had done getting ready for the set of tests, they did not hold the terrors they might have, but beside the term examinations the monthly tests paled into insignificance. She was glad that Mardee Ant had been jolted into action before it was too late, and she resolved not to let her flag in the good work before the Davis medal was safely in hand.

And then there were Christmas presents to make. Mardee's Christmas list was always entirely too long to consider buying the presents ready-made and she spent her afternoons concocting dainty trifles for her family and friends. She did not like to sew, though she had to do more or less of it, since her mother clung to the good old-fashioned notion that a girl ought to

have to make her own clothes. But she was clever with pencil and paints, and for Christmas always managed to manufacture something original that "had a touch of Mardee" about it. For Aunt Harriet she painted a set of place cards, for Rosemary Gibson a dozen score cards, for some of the schoolgirls decorated flower pots, and for others fancy boxes to fill with fudge. But it all took time and assisted in that rapid melting away of the calendar.

"You making that for me, Mard?" inquired Sally one afternoon, watching Mardee at work on a paper poinsettia for a candy box. Sally and Begorry and Marilyn had put their heads in at the front door to call for Mardee without ringing the bell and been bidden back to the dining room where Mardee was at work in the bay window.

"Yes, I'll trim a hat with it for you, if I can find a hat for a dime," responded Mardee. "Then you won't have to call attention to your old hat any more. I don't think you have put it on this winter without saying, 'I wish you would look at this hat! Isn't it a sight?' "

"All right for you!" retorted Sally. "I'll invest a dime in a pair of scissors for you to cut off the tail of your skirt. I'm just as tired of hearing you say, 'I simply must have the skirt of this sailor suit cut off — it is too long in the back'! " Sally's mincing treble was not a real imitation of Mardee, but an exaggeration that brought forth a burst of laughter from the others.

"Somebody ought to give Begorry a new pair of gloves, poor child," she continued, holding up

Begorry's hand to display a hole in the thumb of her glove. "What will you give me, Begorry, if I do that?"

Begorry grinned and replied in the broadest brogue she could assume, "Thot dipinds. If ye're not going to spind anny more on my gloves than Mardee is on your hat, Oi'll give yez a pocketbook to hold what ye've got lift over. Oi guiss Oi kin git wan fur a doime."

"Now listen to that!" Sally besought the others. "Isn't that just like Begorry? Mercenary! Always thinking of filthy lucre. She would value a dollar and a half pair of gloves more than a ten-cent present, and never think of the spirit that prompted the gift. Ingrate!"

Mardee suggested mischievously over her manipulations of the crêpe paper, "it is nice to know Sally is so broad-minded about things of that sort herself, isn't it, girls? Now when I start to buy her present, I sha'n't worry at all. I shall just say to myself, 'Sally is too noble to notice what a thing costs. It is the spirit back of the gift she cares for, and I can save my money for something else!'"

"It's so convenient that she feels that way. As I laughed and told Begorry, I wish everybody did," said Marilyn.

Their shafts, however, went wide of the mark, for Sally's face wore the expression habitual to it when inspiration was at work in her brain.

Begorry was the first one to notice it.

"Sally's about to spring something," she remarked.

"I know what let's do!" Sally burst out, almost in the same breath. "Let's have an S-B-double-M Christmas tree and hang all our presents for each other on it and open them all together. We can have a ten-cent price limit and think up things that will be jokes to give."

The plan was received with acclaim.

"Sally, I'll say you have some head," Marilyn paid tribute slangily.

"T y," answered Sally.

"Y w," Marilyn came back with the appropriate retort. They had long since discarded the more cumbersome forms of "thank you" and "you're welcome."

"How much did that set of Montessori blocks Bunch has cost?" asked Begorry.

Mardee laughed. "You mean the A B C blocks? I know what you are thinking of. I'm going to buy Sally one of those Christmas cards with 'Greetings' on it in big, shiny letters, so she can wear it pinned to the front of her and save herself the trouble of saying it every time she sees any one she knows — just the way blind men wear signs that say 'Help the blind' instead of saying it themselves." This was a reference to Sally's favorite salutation.

It was easy to get jokes on Sally, but Mardee gave much thought to the present she should get for Marilyn. Marilyn continued to be "snippy", and while Mardee resented the injustice of her rancor, she felt sorry for her because she saw how her faults of disposition had poisoned her trust in her friends.

"I am going to give Marilyn something besides what I put on the Christmas tree for her," she told her mother. "I want to send her something specially nice, just to show her that I am friendly in spite of what has happened. And I don't think I'll try to make my little S-B-double-M present a joke on her, for fear she would not understand."

"You're a sweet girl, Mardee," declared her mother.

Mardee had her father's gentle disposition and was at times almost incomprehensible to her energetic mother. Mrs. Gray's tone plainly implied that she did not think Marilyn deserved such kindness.

It aroused Mardee to a defense of her friend. "Well, it would be dreadful to feel that people were thinking unpleasant things about you, wouldn't it? And that is the feeling Marilyn has."

Mrs. Gray answered with decision, "If something could just take her out of herself, she would cease to worry about what other people were thinking of her. She needs to think more of others and less of herself. Her trouble is a form of selfishness."

"But she was born that way," Mardee insisted. "You can't stop being self-conscious and selfish just because somebody tells you to, can you?"

"No, I suppose not," her mother yielded somewhat unwillingly. "What she needs is an absorbing interest."

Mardee pondered over these words. She

wished to establish the old friendly relation between them for the sake of all the rest of the S-B-double-M's, but she did not know how to do it.

"I can't give her an absorbing interest for a Christmas present, or I would," she reflected whimsically.

But a day or two later a way of giving Marilyn an interest to take her out of herself opened up. Just at first Mardee did not recognize it. Miss Rhinebeck asked Mardee to come into her room for a few minutes after school.

"I want my Freshman English classes to give a play along the lines of the school work," she said. "I had a little play in mind which I thought would stimulate interest in the things we are reading in class, and I am planning to give the parts as a reward for excellence in English work. But the classes are large and there can't be enough characters in the play to go around, of course. So I want to talk it over with a few of the girls who are eligible before I assign the parts. It will be a good deal of extra work for those who do take part, and I shall not require it of you if you do not wish to do it. Your grades are as high as those of any of my pupils and I think you would be an appropriate choice for the character I had in mind for you. Do you think you should care to do that for me?"

"To be in a play? Oh, Miss Rhinebeck, you know I should *love* it!" exclaimed Mardee with a ready enthusiasm that encouraged Miss Rhine-

beck in her project and warmed her heart to her willing little ally.

"Good!" she smiled.

"But — oh, Miss Rhinebeck," said Mardee, with a sudden change of expression from delight to thoughtfulness. "Couldn't you let Marilyn Gibson take the part you were going to give me?"

"Why is that?" asked the teacher, surprised, but confident that some problem was troubling Mardee's sympathetic heart.

"I think she'd love to do it as much as I should. And I know she'd do it better. Miss Rhinebeck, you can't think what a good actress she is! We had a play on Hallowe'en and even the grown people who saw it said she really showed talent. But it wasn't just on that account I wanted you to let her be in it —"

Miss Rhinebeck was still smiling an encouraging smile. "Well, why was it, then?"

"It was because she looks so well on the stage — made up, you know, and in the footlights — and she enjoys that, you know, naturally — because I think most of the time she has a feeling that people don't admire her — and — oh, it just seems like an opportunity Marilyn ought not to miss!"

"I see." Miss Rhinebeck nodded her head in a way that relieved the confusion Mardee felt in trying to make her involved explanation. "There isn't any reason why I should not give Marilyn a part in this play. Her grades are sufficiently good to put her on the eligible list. But I don't know why you couldn't both take part. I shall

count on you for one of my theatrical company and invite Marilyn to be another."

"Oh, grand!" cried Mardee gleefully. "And, Miss Rhinebeck, I suppose you had better not say anything to Marilyn about my suggesting her name. Marilyn is sensitive, you know, and she might get an idea you wouldn't have thought of her without that."

Miss Rhinebeck answered, "I understand," and that much was settled.

It was as Mardee had thought. Marilyn was delighted at being asked to be in the play, and the pleasure she felt in anticipation of the event went far to improve her state of mind. The play was not to be produced until after Christmas, and there were not even to be any rehearsals until the holidays were over, but the participants were given their parts so they could begin to study them as soon as work on the examinations was over.

The Christmas examinations loomed larger than anything else on the high school horizon, and particular interest attached to the Freshman grades because of their bearing on the Davis medal. The whole school watched the relative ranking of the first-year students in the hope of picking the winner for June.

It was pretty well known among the Freshmen themselves that the race was narrowing down to a few, those whom Sally had dubbed "Geniuses & Co." And the three principal stockholders in that company, to continue Sally's metaphor, were Branch St. John, Roscoe Lawhead, and Mardee.

Those three had acquired a sort of prestige in classes. They had invariably been among the few who had translated correctly with ease the most difficult passages in Latin. If a knotty problem arose in geometry, it was to those three that every one looked for a solution. And it was always those three names which led the list when the test grades were posted on the bulletin board.

There were two bulletin boards in the high school,— one in the lower hall for Middle and Senior class announcements, and one in the upper hall for matters pertaining to Freshmen alone.

During the last week before Christmas, when the grades for yesterday's exams were posted each day, the Freshman marks were of enough interest to bring a good many students out of the lower study hall up the stairs.

An interested murmur of comment always greeted the results as they went up.

"Branch St. John, Roscoe Lawhead, and Mardee Gray are running neck and neck."

"St. John's ahead to-day."

"But Mardee beat him yesterday."

"And they say Lawhead is likely to come out first in physics."

Branch St. John was first in Latin with 97, and Mardee and Roscoe both got 96.

Roscoe Lawhead fulfilled prophecies and got the highest mark in physics, 97; Branch got 95, and Mardee, whose bent was not scientific, was four or five per cent. lower, with several boys of the class above her.

It looked bad superficially, but careful calcula-

tion showed that her lead over the other two in both history and English made up for it. They tied in geometry. They all got 100.

"There's another race being run that that high school crowd doesn't know anything about," said Doctor Gray, when Mardee told him of the interest the Freshman grades aroused. "And that's the race between Mardee Grasshopper and Mardee Ant. But I think this good work at school has put Mardee Ant a length ahead, and I hope she'll never lose the ground she has gained."

CHAPTER XIII

THE S-B-DOUBLE-M'S TREE

"HERE comes 'Supper' at last!" cried Mardee.

"Glory be!" breathed Sally in theatrical relief. "I shouldn't have missed Marilyn and Begorry, but I was so afraid we'd have to go butterless to bed."

"Look who's here!" called out Marilyn, from halfway down the car-shed, holding on high a pound of butter in a carton.

"Good morning, Merry Sunshine," Sally greeted it affectionately. "Oh, don't be so poky, you two. I think I hear the car coming."

The idea of the S-B-double-M's Christmas tree, suggested that day in Mardee's dining room, had "just growed" like Topsy until it had resulted in an expedition to Crow's Nest Mountain, and Doctor and Mrs. Gray had consented to chaperone the party from one afternoon to the next at their summer cottage. Bab and a special friend of hers named Joycie Rankin had been included, and the girls had divided into three groups, each to furnish one meal. Marilyn and Begorry had earned the title of "Supper" by undertaking to serve the evening meal, Mardee and Sally were "Breakfast", and Bab and Joycie were to pre-

pare to-morrow's dinner with the help of Mrs. Gray. "Supper", in comparing notes after they had reached the appointed meeting place, had discovered the lack of any butter for their meal and gone off to procure the missing article.

"All aboard!" shouted Bab and Begorry in concert, as the Crow's Nest Mountain car thundered under the roof of the transfer station where the party was waiting. There was a scramble for baskets and boxes and suit cases and the girls settled themselves for the long ride to the foot of the mountain. Mrs. Gray was with them. The doctor was to meet them at the top in his automobile.

"Where's Seldom Fed?" inquired Begorry.

Mardee answered, "Daddy has him in the automobile. That was one of the reasons he went up in the auto. He wanted to have it there in case of an emergency call, but they won't take Seldom on the street cars, and there was nobody to look after him at home with Lighty gone to Ringgold to 'take her Christmas' at her sister's."

At the top of the Crow's Nest Mountain Incline they were greeted most enthusiastically by Seldom Fed. Doctor Gray was talking to the clerk of the Crow's Nest Hotel. Seldom, shut up in the automobile, stood up with his forepaws on the door and yapped excitedly at sight of them.

"Poor Seldom, are you lonesome?" sympathized Marilyn, and down came Seldom's ears. "Thump, thump" went his tail on the floor in answering self-pity.

"Want us to go over with you?" Marilyn con-

tinued in the same tone of commiseration, and Seldom gave way to whimpering.

"Seldom! You old humbug!" Mardee reproached him in a voice of bantering laughter, which brought his ears and tail back to normal.

"He'd have plenty of company if we all tried to go over with him, wouldn't he?" commented Sally, surveying the array of baggage spread out around them on the station platform.

A little, rocking street car bumped and thumped its way around the flat mountain top from the incline, furnishing a means of transport to those cottagers who lived back off the brow.

"Mother, you ride over with Daddy and Seldom Fed. I think the street-car conductor would be willing to chaperone us from here," suggested Mardee.

"Gowing owver on the cow?" asked the hotel clerk, when Mrs. Gray had taken her seat beside her husband and the girls were left standing on the platform. He was an Englishman with a marked accent, and in spite of his polite intentions only the timely arrival of the "cow" in question prevented a premature burst of hilarity.

"Hivin hilp us!" gasped Begorry, wiping her eyes, "it does feel a little like riding on a cow, doesn't it?" They were bouncing up and down around the crooked track, safely out of sight of the hotel clerk, and the other girls were still holding their sides in spasms of mirth.

"I'll take your word for it," Sally found breath enough to reply. "I have ridden on a horse and a donkey and an elephant — and a goat

once when I was little — but I have never happened to ride on a cow. You say it feels like this, Begorry?"

"I wish I had seen Begorry taking that ride — or have you done it more than once?" Marilyn joined in, before Begorry had had time to strike back.

"Now I know why you girls call her Bossy every now and then," was Joycie Rankin's contribution to the spirit of the occasion,— a successful one, which redoubled the gale of glee. Begorry had never lived down the nickname bestowed on her the day she had insisted on Sally's laughing in the kodak picture Branch St. John took.

They had been reduced to a pulp of merriment by the time they had alighted from the "cow" and made their way through the woods to the three-room rustic cabin that sheltered the Grays in summer.

Doctor Gray had already built a huge wood fire in the living-room and according to his wife's report had gone to cut down a Christmas tree, and Mrs. Gray was making up the beds. The six girls were to share the one bedroom of the cottage and Doctor and Mrs. Gray were to sleep on the Davenport bed in the living-room.

"Now, 'Supper', get to work. Get a fire made in that stove and give us something to eat," commanded Sally, throwing herself into the best easy-chair with a provoking assumption of leisure.

"Put in more wood than that. See that the

teakettle is filled. Don't forget to open the draughts," she gave orders while the meekly obedient Marilyn and Begorry performed their allotted task. "Gibs, be sure to put plenty of water in the hash and don't let the soup scorch."

"Begorry, lay that tablecloth straight," ordered Mardee, imitating Sally's manner. "It's almost impossible to find a servant who can set the table decently."

"Gibs, I am afraid you are putting those rolls in the oven too soon. They will be dried out before the rest of the supper is done," Sally went on, badgering Marilyn. "Yes, good servants are very hard to get these days," she interrupted herself to complain to Mardee, who nodded a solemn assent.

"Oh, just you wait until breakfast, me darlints!" warned Begorry, and Marilyn selected a light roll from the pan she was about to put into the oven to warm over and shot it through the kitchen door, taking aim at Sally's head. Surprising as it seemed, even to Marilyn herself, the roll took Sally full in the face.

"Avaunt, varlet!" cried Sally in Arthurian protest, hurling the missile back, but with so much less effect that it hit the stovepipe and glanced off into the coal bucket.

"Does thot suit yer ladyship anny bitter?" Begorry inquired of Mardee, relaying the tablecloth with meticulous precision.

Mardee drawled with languid hauteur, "Yes, that will do, I think."

"Very will, me lady," began Begorry, humbly

enough, and finished with an impudent grimace, "we'll see *you* lay it at breakfast, Mard, old girl."

The living-room ran the full length of the front of the house and served as dining room and sitting room combined. Begorry was setting the table in one end of the long apartment while her leisurely mistresses reclined at the other, and Marilyn could be seen through the open door at work in the kitchen beyond. Bab and Joycie were helping Mrs. Gray in the bedroom.

"Don't talk to the servants, girls. It might make them too familiar," cautioned Bab, leaning up against the bedroom doorjamb with an affectation of ease.

Mrs. Gray pointed out of the front windows. "I think I can find a job for all you lazy bones!" she announced in defense of poor, downtrodden "Supper."

Doctor Gray had come up on the porch with a little cedar tree and the girls threw open the door to welcome him and help him set it up. They had brought with them strings of popcorn and cranberries, and "Breakfast" and "Dinner" set to work by the fire making paper chains, allowing "Supper" to finish their job in peace. It was a very much festooned little tree by the time the two had set their steaming dishes on the table. A tin spoon beaten on a dishpan, although quite unnecessary as an announcement, was used with deafening effect when this last was accomplished.

"See here, do I have to serve all these plates?" asked Doctor Gray in mock horror, pointing to

the plates piled up at the head of the table.

"No, sir, you don't!" replied Sally promptly. "I am the father of this family," and she plumped herself down in his chair at the head of the table.

"Mardee is the mother," she went on. "Joycie is our little boy, and Bab is the baby. Doctor and Mrs. Gray are the twins. Begorry and Marilyn, you may eat at the table with the family. Now you must all do exactly what I say, for I shall not spare the rod and spoil the child. *Be seated!*"

The stern father gave his command in a voice of thunder and his family very meekly obeyed.

"What do you think of the servants? I think we had better fire them," declared "Father" when the meal was nearly over.

"I think the way the dishes have been emptied would serve as a recommendation for any cooks," said Doctor Gray, but was frowned down for his temerity in defense of "Supper" by the fierce parent.

"Don't dispute my word, Twinny! This is the last meal these servants shall prepare. Mother and I will get breakfast ourselves."

"And Gibs and I will be the grandmothers then!" cried Begorry.

"And won't we lie in bed late and make the young folks wait on us? Oh, boy!" gloated Marilyn. "We'll pay them back for the way they have treated poor 'Supper'!"

After supper everybody pitched in and washed the dishes together. Then they hung their stock-

ings in a row on the living-room mantelpiece and at "Father's" command retired early, so as to be ready to exchange gifts in the morning.

They retired, that is, to the bedroom,—not to bed. There were two double beds and a mattress on the floor on a row for them to sleep on. "Supper", "Breakfast" and "Dinner" were to sleep together, "Supper" occupying one bed, "Breakfast" another, and "Dinner" the third, and there was a lively fight for the possession of the two bedsteads until some one jumped on the one captured and defended by "Supper" and broke it down. Then it had to be made up on the floor, too. "Breakfast", through the weight of Sally's authority as head of the family, had no difficulty in establishing their right to the one remaining bedstead, but their conquest proved to be a barren triumph.

There was a vaudeville show in costumes which might have given it the name of a lingerie display, and a ballet on the beds, which were "bouncy" enough to make an excellent floor for such a performance, and a romp and a pillow fight which reduced the whole room to such a hopeless state of confusion that nobody could have told what covers belonged on what beds. Then all the covers were piled on "Dinner's" bed and all six girls wrapped themselves in them and huddled together, telling ghost stories until some one suggested pickles. When they had come back from raiding the kitchen and everybody had grabbed what comforts and pillows they could wrest from the others, poor "Breakfast"

emerged from the struggle with only one blanket and a light comfort, and after the fire went out they shivered with cold.

"Give us another blanket, 'Supper.' You got ours," they begged.

"You got the best bed, didn't you?" "Supper" retorted. "You don't want to take our covers away from us, too!"

"George never comes down my side street;
The reason is — he has cold feet!"

Marilyn sang jeeringly from the chorus of a classic familiar to them all.

"George never foregathers where the boys and girls meet;
The reason is — he has cold feet!"

Begorry took up the refrain.

"George never has a nickel when the fellows treat;
The reason is — he has cold feet!"

Bab and Joycie joined in, and some one sang another verse of "Cold Feet" at intervals all through the night.

Towards morning "Breakfast" stole most of the covers off "Supper's" bed and when "Supper" got cold enough to wake up, the fight began all over again and did not end until at six o'clock when Mardee went into the kitchen for wood and brought back enough to make a fire.

Before the girls were dressed they could hear Doctor and Mrs. Gray moving about in the living-

room, and when, before daylight, Mrs. Gray called them, they found the room bright and cozy with firelight and greeted with bursts of glee a table in the middle of it piled high with fruit and nuts and candy.

"Oh, yum! Yum!" smacked Begorry.

"What's the matter with Doctor and Mrs. Gray?" demanded Sally in the familiar high school phraseology.

"They're all right!" the others took up the cue.

"Who's all right?"

"Doctor and Mrs. Gray!"

"Who says so?"

"We *all* say so!"

"Oranges and bananas, rah! rah! rah!" Sally finished the yell by herself. "Now everybody look away and appear unconscious while I slip these tokens of esteem into the stockings they were intended for."

They all made an elaborate pretense of putting their packages into each other's stockings surreptitiously and feigned great surprise when they found their own stockings filled.

"Why, l! S. C. h b here!" cried Sally with both hands upraised.

"S. C. must be Santa Claus," hazarded Mardee.

"'Santa Claus has been here.' Never mind the 'l' now," said Marilyn, making a grab for her stocking.

"It was just 'look' anyhow," offered Sally generously.

"See what is pinned to the toe of mine!" cried Bab.

It was a rag doll with "For Bab" pinned conspicuously to the front of it.

"For Baby," Sally read it mischievously. "Here, Snookums. Now the darlin' won't cry. I'd like to know the meaning of this!" she exploded, unfolding a tall dunce cap stuck in the top of her own stocking. "There must have been some mistake. Begorry, this was probably intended for you," and she forthwith clapped it on her long-suffering chum's head.

"Read what it says on the card," suggested Marilyn. They were all sitting in a half-circle in the firelight with their lumpy stockings in their laps.

" 'A means to show Miss Herrington you don't know anything,' " read Sally, and was greeted with bursts of laughter. "All right," she agreed good-naturedly, and taking the cap off Begorry's brown hair set it on her own head. "I'll never forget that awful day when I blurted out I was unprepared in roll call."

Begorry proposed a method of procedure. "Sally, open all yours first. If we take turns, none of us will miss anything."

"Why, bless the child! She has human intelligence, after all," proclaimed Sally, with a patronizing pat on Begorry's knee.

She took out, one after another, a set of letter blocks marked "Initials", a pocketbook to hold her "filthy lucre", a shoe placarded "To live in when you have so many children you don't know

what to do", and a handkerchief "to wipe your eyes on when you think of the d d d b r."

"Though as I laughed and told Begorry, I'll probably use my sleeve anyway," she remarked.

"Here's another reference to that fatal day," said Marilyn, unwrapping a toy chair out of her own stocking and reading aloud the inscription: "Gibs, take this chair and see if you can make Miss Herrington's class entertaining."

"I have one, too," confessed Begorry, ruefully exhibiting a little china cow wearing about her neck the name of "Bossy."

Another of Begorry's presents which proved especially successful was a notebook "to keep all her information about Simon O'Rola in."

"If I ever find out his real name I'll write it on the first page," she promised Mardee, who had given it to her.

Some one else had given her a book of Irish jokes.

"Now, Mardee, it's your turn," said Marilyn, when she and Begorry had finished opening theirs.

The first present Mardee unwrapped was a little match-safe head yawning so widely that the mouth held the matches. It bore the legend, "Mardee cramming for exams."

"Here, Dad, is a portrait of a friend of yours," she said, stretching out her arm to hand it to her father.

"Who is that?" he inquired.

"Mardee Ant."

He smiled back. "I'll keep it," and he tucked

it in his pocket while Mardee unwrapped her next package.

She got a pair of kindergarten scissors "to cut off the tail of her sailor suit", and Sally's gift was a T-square with no comment whatever on the accompanying card.

She puzzled over this for some time until Begorry, accustomed to translating remarks in initials, sang out "Tom"! and Mardee blushed crimson at the laugh that followed.

"Poor Seldom! Didn't 'oo get a thing?" Bab sympathized, with an arm about Seldom Fed's neck when the presents had all been opened.

"Never mind, Seldom. Here's something for you." Begorry rose and held up a lump of peppermint candy from the table for him to jump for. Seldom Fed, who had been in a quiver of interest throughout the whole performance, sprang after it like a jack-in-the-box, and the girls took turns feeding him and making him jump. They ate oranges and bananas and cracked nuts by the fire until broad daylight, and then "Supper" heartlessly went back to bed to make up some of their lost sleep while "Breakfast" repaired to the kitchen to labor and toil for them.

"Sally, have my coffee hot when I get up, and don't let it boil but one minute," commanded Marilyn.

"Mard, old girl, I shall expect to find the cloth straight when you call me to breakfast," cautioned Begorry, departing for the bedroom with a yawn.

"And don't burn the biscuits, Lune, whatever you do," Marilyn could not resist coming back for one last parting shot, with both arms stretched luxuriously over her head. "Do you remember how particular you were about the rolls last night? Well, as I laughed and told Begorry, he laughs best who laughs last," she added teasingly with every *a* very broad.

CHAPTER XIV

AN ADVENTURE

Before the morning was over every girl had had a nap and felt as much refreshed as though she had slept all night. But no one was very hungry when dinner time came, for they had eaten fruit and nuts and candy intermittently all morning. "Dinner's" really excellent repast was thrown away upon their jaded appetites, and the dessert with which Bab and Joycie had thought to distinguish themselves received only half-hearted praise.

"What you girls need is some exercise in the open air," prescribed Doctor Gray. "Put on your things and go out for a walk. Mother and I will wash the dishes."

"Don't stay too long," warned Mrs. Gray. "We must pack up our possessions in time to get back to town before dark."

"Marilyn has on a wrist watch. We will watch the time and be sure to get back early," some of the girls assured her, and they set out, accompanied by Seldom Fed.

Marilyn and Mardee did not walk together. There was no open hostility between them. The girls were all together in one company, but when they separated into small groups Marilyn and

Mardee were never in the same one. Mardee had made all the friendly advances she felt she could without seeming to thrust herself on Marilyn. She had sent her for her real Christmas gift a dainty hand-painted box filled with home-made candy, and she had put a pretty Christmas card in Marilyn's stocking that morning. Marilyn had thanked her politely, but without enthusiasm, for the box of candy, and had given her a present without any personal application at the S-B-double-M Christmas celebration. She still showed by her manner that she "would never trust Mardee again as long as she lived", and Mardee's feelings were hurt by her unresponsiveness.

They started out in the direction of the western brow of the mountain.

"Let's go to Sunset Rock," suggested Sally. Sunset Rock was a crag which commanded a wide view of the western valley.

"You get a better view of the city from the Point, and it's not so far," amended fat Begorry. "I brought the marshmallows left over, and some matches. We can build a fire on the rocks and toast them before we start back."

"Reminds you of the day we cooked dinner down at the cave under the shoulder of the mountain, doesn't it?" Mardee said to Marilyn.

"Wonder if we'd have time to go there?" Marilyn replied.

Sally said, "I didn't know there was a cave under the shoulder of the mountain."

"Neither did I until the Gibsons showed it to

me when we were up here for Mr. Gibson's birthday," Mardee told her. It seemed ages ago that she and Marilyn had had that friendly visit together. Together they told the others about cooking dinner in the cave and being frightened by seeing Roscoe Lawhead through the underbrush.

"Let's go there and see it," proposed Sally. "It won't take any longer to climb down over the shoulder than to go clear out to the Point, and we could toast our marshmallows there."

The outcome of the matter was that they set off to the head of the steep climb down over the shoulder. They walked with swinging strides. It was a beautiful sunshiny day, typical of the Southern winter, cold enough to make walking pleasant, crisp but not bitter, and warm in the sheltered spots. The great bare rocks on the side of the mountain seemed to bask in the sun, and standing on the top before the steep descent, the girls seemed to see the whole world spread out at their feet and to be as high as the buzzards circling about against the vivid blue of the sky before them. Seldom Fed tore through the underbrush, chasing bugs and shadows, and making long flying leaps over gulleys and bushes in an ecstasy of joy.

They swung down over the side of the mountain, clinging to the trees, slipping, sliding, gasping, laughing, and letting themselves down by any support they could find. Once Sally sat down and clung to a tree while the other girls slid down a steep slope holding on to one of her feet, and

then Sally let go and the others caught her as she slid into their arms.

"The saints pr-r-resarve us when it comes to getting back up again," sighed Begorry in despair.

"Oh, we can find a better place than this," Mardee assured her. "But it will take longer to come back than it will to go down."

"I can never get through here!" wailed Begorry, as they started single file through a narrow pass between the rocks.

Marilyn named the spot "Fat Man's Squeeze", and Sally declaimed:

"Who enters here leaves hope behind!"

"Laves paces of his skin behoind, ye mane," lamented Begorry.

> "Lives of fat men all remind us
> We can make our shape sublime
> And in passing leave behind us
> Skin upon the rocks of time,"

Sally paraphrased.

With Sally pulling and Mardee pushing, they managed to get Begorry through with a whole skin, and without mishap reached the cave.

"Fill you with memories, Mardee?" asked Sally slyly, as they were all gathering wood to make a fire. "I hope you brought your T-square along to keep you company."

Mardee raised a big stick threateningly and Sally dodged and fled, with Mardee in pursuit.

They built a fire without any trouble, and the marshmallows, toasted after their vigorous climb

and eaten in the outdoor air, tasted better than the really delicious dinner they had been too sluggish to enjoy. Lying down in the comfortable cave, out of the wind and warmed by the afternoon sun, pillowed on soft beds of dry leaves and enjoying the splendid view of the river and the city, they were so completely at their ease that they forgot to notice the time.

"Marilyn, is it getting late?" Mardee asked at last.

Marilyn glanced at her wrist.

"It's four o'clock!" she exclaimed, sitting up suddenly.

"And it gets dark by six!" gasped Joycie Rankin.

"We ought to be at home again in less than half an hour!" said Bab.

"We can never do it in this world," declared Begorry.

"I believe we could get back to the cottage more quickly by going down to the foot of the mountain and taking the incline and the street car than by trying to walk back with this awful climb over the shoulder to make," suggested Sally.

Mardee agreed. "I believe we could. It is not far down to the railroad track from here, and we can follow the track around to the incline station. There is a trestle over that little stream, though." She ended dubiously and pointed to the torrent that rushed down the mountain side just beyond them toward the city.

"I guess it will be safe enough to walk the

trestle," said Sally. "Two trains have passed since we have been here. Surely it will be a long while before another one comes."

The climb down to the railroad track was a short one and not difficult, and once on the right of way they were able to make good time.

Mardee and Begorry led the way down and reached the track first. Bab and Joycie came next, and Sally and Marilyn were last. They were delayed for a few minutes when the strap of Marilyn's leggings caught on a projecting root and she had to stop to rebuckle it. The girls were all dressed in the knickers and leggings which were the favorite costume for roughing it on Crow's Nest Mountain. Mardee and Begorry, with Seldom Fed trotting before them, crossed the trestle without any trouble and stopped at the end to wait for the others.

"How the water roars over the rocks down there," commented Begorry. "You can scarcely hear your own voice when you are in the middle of the trestle with the water directly under you."

Just as the two younger girls joined Mardee and Begorry, Marilyn and Sally stepped on to the trestle from the other side. The four who had already crossed stood watching them, fortunately, for if they had not been facing in their direction they would never have seen the train which rounded the mountain behind the two girls on the trestle.

"Marilyn! Sally! Look behind you! A train is coming!" they shrieked in confusion.

But the two on the trestle were deafened by the

noise of the water pouring over the rocks below them,— as deaf to the voices of their friends as they were to the rush of the train.

The girls on the land made frantic gestures, seeking to attract their attention. They waved their arms, they pointed in the direction of the train, they made trumpets of their hands and hallooed, they whistled, they waved their handkerchiefs. Seldom Fed became infected by their excitement and added his furious barking to the general confusion. But the two on the trestle were shouting at each other in conversation unconscious of danger, oblivious of their surroundings.

It all happened in a moment. Mardee perceived that unless they could be made to hurry they were certain to be overtaken by the train. And she saw that the only way to make them understand was to run back on the track and tell them.

"If I had had time to think I might not have been so bold," she modestly declared afterwards. But she had no time to think. With an instinct of protection she ran towards them, gesticulating and pointing. When at last the girls became aware of their danger the train was almost on them. Mardee turned with them and the three ran as fast as their feet would carry them over the treacherous ties.

"Roll down the bank!" shouted Mardee, throwing herself off the track the moment she reached the spot where the rails touched land again. There was a long, steep fill before the

track came to level ground. The other two followed Mardee's example and went sliding and rolling down the steep embankment to the loose earth and broken rock at the bottom. Marilyn, the last one, had barely left the track when the train thundered past so close that the great drive wheels and pistons seemed to fill her whole range of vision. All three were covered with mud and scratched and bruised and disheveled when they picked themselves up in the ditch at the bottom. The sharp rocks had cut their skin and torn their clothes, and they were weak from fright. But Sally and Mardee managed to stand on their feet.

Marilyn, however, gave a gasp and sank back half-fainting, when she attempted to rise.

"Are you hurt?" asked Mardee.

"It's my ankle. I suppose it's sprained." Even with the faintness of her voice and the effort she made to speak at all, there was more of warmth in Marilyn's tone than there had been since the quarrel.

"Oh, Mardee!" she sobbed, throwing her arms around her neck. "I think I may be going to faint, and if I do I want to say first of all — thank you — and forgive me."

Mardee disclaimed any credit. "Why, Marilyn, you would have done the same thing yourself."

The other girls and the dog were clambering down to them by that time in a zigzag path less difficult than the precipitous descent the three who had so narrowly escaped death had been obliged to make.

Marilyn did not faint, and found that by putting her arms around the necks of two girls she was able, with the support of another from behind, to drag along on her one good foot. But the sprained ankle was causing her excruciating agony. They had to follow the ditch over rocks and bushes and every sort of irregularity to a place where the ascent to the track was less steep. The path was difficult enough for the girls who were not hurt.

"I can never reach the incline," groaned Marilyn.

"Roscoe Lawhead said his house faced the railroad track just beyond the trestle!" cried Mardee, the memory of his words coming to her like an inspiration. "If we can get you that far, you can be made comfortable while somebody goes for help."

Bab and Joycie went to look for the house and came back reporting that they had found it, and with a great deal of difficulty they all helped Marilyn to reach it. It was a little two-room cabin with a dogtrot between the rooms, the typical house of the Southern mountaineer. It was set on the slope in a clearing without any enclosure about it, a meandering path leading up to it from the railroad track, and a motley collection of tumble-down sheds, pigpens, chicken roosts, and washtubs behind it. A flock of dirty children ran like scared rabbits at the approach of strangers, but one little girl of nine or ten appeared on the porch between the two rooms to await developments. She did not speak until the

girls addressed her, and when asked if Marilyn might lie down on a bed in the house she replied with a sort of frightened politeness in the affirmative.

Inside, the house was in disorder, as might have been expected of a house that had held so many children, but it was not dirty, and the girls perceived that the dirt on the children was only external, such as any child would acquire after playing all day.

"Maw hasn't come home yet. She works down in St. Elmo," explained the little ten-year-old. St. Elmo was the suburb at the foot of the mountain.

"What does she do?" asked Mardee, just to be making conversation.

"She cleans up for folks by the day," explained the child.

"You are Roscoe's sister, aren't you?" Sally asked.

"Yes'm. Roscoe ain't here neither. He works afternoons and Saturdays and holidays in Mr. Stone's store."

"Do you stay here and take care of the younger children all day while your mother and Roscoe are gone?" inquired Begorry.

"Yes'm. Florry and Myrtle work in the medicine factory and the rest of us stay here."

"Don't you go to school?"

"No'm. I went till last year while Myrtle stayed with the little fellers, but now Myrtle is in the medicine factory and I stay at home. J. P. and Leafy are in school. When Leafy gets big

enough to look after Lady Kate and Benny, I reckon I'll work in the medicine factory."

"How far did you get in school?"

"I was in the third grade."

Begorry had been putting the questions while Mardee and Sally were washing the dirt off their cuts and bruises and setting to rights their hair and disordered clothing. The two others were doing what they could for Marilyn.

"Did you hear all of that?" Begorry asked in an aside of Mardee.

Mardee nodded with a glance of pity at the child.

"I'm all right now," she said. "I think I had better go up to the cottage right away and tell Mother and Daddy what has happened and bring Daddy down here to see what he can do for Marilyn."

But Bab turned from Marilyn with a characteristically competent suggestion. "You had better stay here, Mardee — you and Sally. Somebody ought to stay with Marilyn, and after the shock that you and Sally have had I am sure that Daddy would say the best thing you two could do was to keep still."

The other girls agreed with her when they had talked it over, and it was finally arranged that Begorry and Bab and Joycie should go back to the cottage to get Doctor Gray and assist Mrs. Gray in bringing the baggage down the mountain. Sally and Mardee were not seriously hurt, but they agreed to await Doctor Gray's instructions where they were.

Mrs. Lawhead came home before Doctor Gray arrived. She was a thin, tired-looking woman with an intelligent face that told plainly where Roscoe got the brains and ambition that had made him what he was in spite of difficulties. She was most sympathetic when she heard what had happened to the girls, and did what she could to make them as comfortable as possible.

"Run down to the store, Luvertis," she said to the little girl who had done all the talking before, "and bring home a pone of light bread and a box of tea. I ain't got enough in the house to cook you-all supper," she explained to her guests, "but I aim to make you some tea and toast. I think it ought to sorter revive you."

Mardee and Marilyn and Sally begged her not to do it, realizing the sacrifice that the spending of a single penny must mean to her, but she insisted with hospitable firmness, and Luvertis departed on her errand.

"You-all hadn't ought to have tried to walk that trestle," Mrs. Lawhead went on. "There's a train acrost there every few minutes all day. This pass through the mountains is the only way into the city from this side, and four or five railroads use this here track."

When Luvertis came back Roscoe was with her. He said Luvertis had told him about them and he had asked Mr. Stone to let him come home to be of some assistance if possible.

"Can't I telephone to your folks for you?" he asked.

The girls, more and more filled with gratitude

to the whole kindly family, thanked him but replied that they had decided to wait until Doctor Gray came and let him tell them what he thought it best for them to do.

Doctor Gray came in a little while, and after looking them over, told Sally and Mardee that they were all right. He disinfected their scratches and asked Roscoe to take them to the incline station and see that they joined Mrs. Gray and the rest of the party there.

"And go into town in these clothes on the street car?" cried Mardee.

"It is already dark. The mothers will be getting anxious," said Doctor Gray.

But when he had examined Marilyn's ankle and learned of the facilities for removing her comfortably from the cabin he yielded to Mrs. Lawhead's importunities to let her keep Marilyn for the night, and asked Roscoe to telephone Mrs. Gibson from the foot of the mountain.

Mr. and Mrs. Gibson came out to the Lawhead's cabin as soon as they got the telephone message. Doctor Gray did not leave until they had arrived. Then Roscoe lighted him down the steep slope and along the railroad track to his car, and he and Seldom Fed departed. Mr. and Mrs. Gibson slept that night in St. Elmo and did not attempt to take Marilyn home until it was light enough to get her to their automobile in comfort. She spent that night with her new friends, and made the acquaintance besides of Florry and Myrtle when they came back from the patent medicine factory where they worked. She found that they were girls of thir-

teen and fifteen with their brother's quick intelligence, though without the advantage of the amount of schooling he had had, and she came away with a deep admiration and respect for the whole Lawhead family.

CHAPTER XV

POLITICS

Marilyn did not walk again for five weeks. But the S-B-double-M's gathered at her house in the afternoons when they got out of school and she kept up with everything that went on at school and among her friends.

She sent for Mardee to come to see her the day she was brought home from the Lawheads' and they had a long talk and came to a complete understanding.

"I have found out that it was not your mother who telephoned to Mother the night after I told you about sending my picture to the *Times*," Marilyn told Mardee.

"I asked Mother about it as soon as I got home from school that next day," said Mardee, "and she told me she had not."

She did not add, as she might have, that she did not tell Marilyn so because it would have been useless. But Marilyn was in a very repentant mood, and Mardee, who was generous by nature anyhow, could well afford to be so now.

Marilyn went on, "I wish I had asked Mother about it right away. I didn't because I felt so certain that nobody could have known about it except Mrs. Gray. And then when I told Mother

how I felt about your saving my life at the risk of your own when we had quarreled and were mad at each other, she heard about the trouble between us for the first time, and told me that it was Miss Daisy Long who had told her. Miss Daisy had just guessed it from my mailing a photograph to the *Times* through her window."

"It couldn't have made any difference, though, if you had known it was Miss Daisy instead of Mother. Because you remember you said that the whole question was whether *I* had told anybody or not, and I *had* told Mother."

"Oh, Mardee, I am so sorry I said that!" Marilyn reached for Mardee's hand and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Mother says you were exactly right — and so does Dad. They asked me to tell them what the trouble was between us, and I still felt that I had something on my side, but Dad said that he was gladder to have you for a friend of mine now than he was before, if possible. And he's been crazy about you ever since that visit you made us on the mountain. He said that a girl that wouldn't keep a secret from her mother was sure to be a safe companion for any other girl. And Mother said she blamed herself for not having kept my confidence as your mother had kept yours. And then we had some love feast, believe me!" Marilyn's eyes twinkled humorously in spite of her real sincerity. "I want to beg your pardon for all the hateful things I said and did," she finished seriously.

"Marilyn, you need not beg my pardon. I could see all the time how you looked at it."

"But I said I would never trust you again as long as I lived, and then you ran back on the trestle to tell me the train was coming!"

"That was nothing. You see I wasn't hurt."

"Oh, Mardee, if you had been! But since you were not, and nobody was but me, I am glad the thing happened. Because unless something had occurred to make me talk it over with Mother, and especially Dad, I suppose I should have gone on forever seeing the thing all crank-sided and nursing a grudge against you. And do you know, Mardee, I am so much more comfortable inside now that I don't feel unkindly towards anybody."

"Well, I know I am a whole lot more comfortable, too," laughed Mardee gaily. "I think we shall always be better friends now."

Miss Rhinebeck had intended to have the play in January, but she postponed it until Marilyn was able to return, and in order that it might not be delayed any longer than necessary the girls in the cast held rehearsals at Marilyn's house all the time that she was out of school. The characters were all girls and there were only four of them.

Mardee devoted herself very faithfully to her school work. The weather was bad — January and the early part of February were always murky and wet in Channingsburg — and there was no temptation outdoors to cause her to forsake her books.

There was a big cushioned rocking chair in the corner by the stove in the Grays' dining room

and Mardee liked nothing better than to curl up in its soft depths, with an orange to suck and a book to read and Seldom Fed snoozing comfortably at her feet, his nose on his paws.

"There wouldn't be any Mardee Grasshopper if all the days were like these," she told her father. "Mardee Ant has everything her own way when the pleasantest thing you can do is to sit by the fire and read."

At school a lively contest was on between the boys of the Freshman and Senior classes. The Senior boys had ordered some caps in the high school colors with the number of their class year on them. The caps had come during the holidays, and with the opening of school after the New Year, purple and white headgear had blossomed forth wherever there were Seniors. But the Freshman boys, in revenge for the upper class interference with their first meeting, determined to make the Seniors defend their right to wear them. Whenever a Senior appeared in one he had to keep his attention on his head or he couldn't keep his cap there. It was likely to be snatched off and run away with by some Freshman. The Middle-class boys, of course, felt it incumbent upon their dignity to side with their fellow upper-classmen; and for three days, until the Freshmen conceded that the Seniors had established their right to wear their new bonnets in peace, every recess and dismissal bell was a signal for a free-for-all fight.

Across the street from the high school was a bakery run by a kind-hearted fat German named

Schmitt and his wife and daughters. Mr. Schmitt — or "Schmitty" as he had been known to high school students from time immemorial — was a friend to man and beast. He had sold enough penny cinnamon buns on credit to have wrecked another business, and he had put in a watering trough at the curb stone in front of his door out of this same spirit of willingness to serve free refreshments to those who were unable to pay.

The favorite punishment meted out by the Seniors to the Freshmen for their rash interference with their betters was a ducking in this watering trough, and first and last, from the Freshmen's tendency to band together and duck the ducker, nearly every boy in the high school had a bath in Schmitty's tank. Fortunately the weather, though wet, was mild enough not to make such a form of battle dangerous to life. But naturally it was hard on the clothes of those warriors who received the scars of combat.

Roscoe Lawhead did not take any part in the scuffling. He was older than the majority of even the Seniors, and he came to school in the pursuance of a serious purpose. He studied at recess and during the lunch hour because his work outside of school left him very little time for doing it then, and immediately after school he hurried away to the store where he clerked in the afternoons.

There was a boy named Deaderick Broom in the Senior class who came from St. Elmo and who was well known to Roscoe. He was a poor boy and Roscoe knew that the damage to his

clothes from a ducking in the watering trough would be a serious matter to his family. He was not even wearing a Senior cap, but on the Wednesday in the midst of the struggle, just as school was being dismissed, some boy in the front of the Freshman lines called out, "Let's duck all the Seniors!" and Deaderick Broom was seized on with the rest of his classmates by the zealous defenders of the anti-cap faith.

"You boys let Deaderick Broom alone," said Roscoe Lawhead, quietly enough.

"He's a Senior, and the Seniors started this ducking business," answered one of the boys who had captured young Broom.

"Let him alone, I tell you," demanded Roscoe with determination.

"You make us!" sang out some little "fresh Freshie", and his lead established the tone of all his associates.

"All right. I'll make you," replied Roscoe doggedly. Out of respect for Deaderick's feelings he did not make any explanation of the stand he had taken, but having taken it he meant to stick to it. He put down his books and took off his coat and announced that the boy that ducked Deaderick Broom had him to fight first.

Of course the kind of boy who would insist upon ducking an inoffensive person in the face of a reasonable request not to was not the kind who would accept an invitation to fight, particularly with a boy very much larger than himself, and it was not necessary for Roscoe to jeopardize his body in defense of his friend. The group of

Freshmen melted away, hurling insults such as "You're a great Freshman president, you are!" and "Traitor!" at Roscoe, and Deaderick Broom was allowed to depart unducked.

Thursday and Friday the youngsters whom Roscoe had defied nursed their rancor. By Thursday night the cap rush had come to an end. Friday they took out their spite by talking among others of the same stamp as themselves — the Bolshevik members of the class — but nothing came of their insinuations against Roscoe until Monday. On Monday, however, a boy whom Mardee knew very slightly came up to her during the lunch hour and asked her as vice-president of the Freshman class to call a meeting for that afternoon to impeach the president and put him out of office.

Mardee laughed at him.

"Do you want it announced that Roscoe is to be impeached for not ducking Deaderick Broom in Schmitty's tank?" she inquired.

But the matter was evidently not a joke to the spokesman who had approached her.

"We mean to get rid of a traitor as president," he said.

Mardee stopped smiling and her eyes snapped at him angrily.

"I will never call such a silly meeting!" she vowed. "And what is more, I wouldn't attend it, and neither would any of the better element in the class. It is only the rag-tag and bob-tail who could make a serious matter of his defending his friend against a wetting. Perhaps Deaderick

had a cold. You don't know. He certainly would have had to take a long street-car ride in wet clothes. It was all in play, anyway, and for us to do such a thing would be a disgrace!"

"Well, you needn't think the 'rag-tag and bob-tail' can't have a meeting without you," said the boy. "We shall select a temporary chairman and hold a meeting whether you and your fine friends come or not."

"Oh, I didn't mean to call you ugly names," cried Mardee in dismay. "But I don't think the boys who wanted to call this meeting were at their best. It will put our whole class in disrepute. Can't you ask them to think it over first?"

But the representative of the "rag-tag and bob-tail" departed in high dudgeon and Mardee flew to seek out Branch St. John and Don Willis and others of the boys whom she felt did belong to the better element of the class.

"Oh, Branch, do you know what the boys are doing?" she asked, finding Branch at the dictionary stand in the upper hall.

"About that meeting?" he said.

"Yes. They wanted me to preside as vice president."

"Don't you do it, Mardee. Don't you even go to the meeting. But you girls stay around the school building here this afternoon. Don't go home, because it may be that you could do some good if the thing came to a vote. We will keep a scout there and if it looks as if we were needed to help Roscoe we will go in."

So after school Mardee and the other S-B-double-M's and a good many of the Freshman girls who had been warned by Mardee or by Branch and Don and their friends stayed in the girls' gymnasium in the basement and awaited the result of the meeting upstairs.

The boys holding the impeachment proceedings elected a temporary chairman and got down to business. In a little while a messenger from Branch's crowd came to the gymnasium to say that Roscoe Lawhead's resignation had been handed in and they needed all the votes of the conservatives towards not accepting it.

"You girls come on upstairs and see what you can do," he said.

When the girls got upstairs they found, as they had expected, that the meeting was largely made up of the riffraff of the class who were in favor of accepting the resignation forthwith, and that while the steady crowd was against it, their numbers were in the minority, so many of them having stayed away from unwillingness to lend their presence to anything they so disapproved of. A good many had waited to see if they could be of use, provided the other crowd succeeded in getting a quorum together, but a good many others had gone home and it was not possible to reach them.

Irresponsible little hot-heads were popping up to make speeches in which they called Roscoe "traitor"; and the chairman, instead of remaining neutral, was urging the "disloyalty" of the president on the class.

Branch St. John had entered with the latecomers and he rose to make a speech.

"Fellows," he said, "I'd like to ask a question. Of course we're only schoolboys, but in school an honor is an honor and a disgrace is a disgrace, just as it is out in the world. Now what I want to know is: Was this cap rush anything but fun, and is it a part of a class president's duty to duck people in the watering trough? Are we going to punish our president with disgrace for such a trivial thing? For something done in play? Aren't we acting too hastily — on the spur of the moment — without giving ourselves time for consideration? And aren't we doing something we shall have cause to regret later on?"

When he sat down there was a lot of applause in certain quarters and he had evidently won some converts, but a little excited Freshie jumped up and said that Roscoe Lawhead had never been a good president, anyway.

Branch St. John jumped to his feet again.

"I challenge anybody in this class to prove that in one single instance Roscoe Lawhead has ever been anything but a good president!" he shouted.

"Well, I challenge Branch St. John to show us a single instance in which he has been a good president," said the same Freshie.

"That is not what this meeting is for," Branch retorted. "Roscoe Lawhead *is* our president and we have to give sufficient cause why he should be put out of office."

"I'd like to know who nominated him in the

first place," said another of the Bolsheviki. "He never was one of us. He is five or six years older than any of the rest of us."

Branch was jumping up and down like a jack-in-the-box.

"I'll tell you who nominated him for office," he said, jumping up again. "I nominated him. And I'll nominate him again for any honor I can get for him in recognition of his worth. And no one with any manliness or respect for honest effort would desire to put him out of office for being older than the rest of us. He is older — and he's a better man than most of us, too. Fellows, perhaps the rest of you didn't know what I know about Roscoe Lawhead. Perhaps you didn't understand. His father was a poor man with a family of eight children. His father had not had any education and though he worked hard he could not make enough to support his family. Roscoe had to work instead of going to school. But he wanted an education because he saw what it had meant to his father not to have one, and his mother encouraged him in trying to get one. He went to night school and worked in the day. It took him a long time to prepare for the high school, studying that way. Then his father died and for a year or two he couldn't go to school at all. When some of the other children got old enough to go to work it was possible for him to come to school. It was possible because his mother went out to work and because his sisters worked and because he works after school and on all his holidays. You can see he

doesn't come to school to play. I, for one, am proud to have such a president. I want to have him one of us, whatever his age. And the fellow that can't see that he is to be respected for showing the courage to come to school with boys so much younger than himself hasn't the manliness to know honest effort when he sees it!"

"Branch St. John ought to be a lawyer," Mardee whispered to Sally, who was sitting in the same seat with her. "He could melt the heart of any jury."

He had, in fact, accomplished a good deal by his oratorical efforts, for when at last the ballots were counted there was only a small majority in favor of accepting Roscoe's resignation, in spite of the fact that the meeting was made up largely of those who in the first place had been all for impeaching him.

"It's accepted," announced the boy who had been counting the ballots.

"And it's a disgrace!" flashed out Branch St. John.

When they started nominating a new president some one put up Don Willis's name, but Don sprang up and withdrew it.

"I would not accept such a nomination!" he exclaimed.

Ed McKie was also nominated but refused to run.

Sally whispered to Mardee, "It shows what kind of boys have done this thing if they can't even pick a leader from among their own ranks."

Then Branch was nominated.

"I withdraw my name," he said disgustedly. "And I suggest that to save time you look for the boy who started this and give him the office he wanted!"

They finally settled the matter by choosing a boy who was not present, and when the voting began Branch St. John, Don Willis, and nearly all the boys who had opposed accepting Roscoe's resignation took up their hats and left the study hall.

Mardee and her friends, perceiving that their services were no longer needed, followed them out and went to the cloakroom for their hats and wraps.

CHAPTER XVI

MORE POLITICS

"Good for you, Branch! You made a fine speech," said Mardee, meeting Branch on the sidewalk in front of the high school as they were leaving the building.

"Two or three fine speeches," Don corrected her, coming up just then to shake hands enthusiastically with Branch.

"You made a fine speech yourself when you refused to accept the nomination," Branch returned.

"I wouldn't accept such a presidency as a gift," declared Don.

"The whole affair is a burning shame!" said Branch.

Mardee nodded. "I feel so sorry for Roscoe. I know his family. We girls went to their house the day we nearly got caught on the trestle, and no one could have been kinder than they were to us. I hope Mrs. Lawhead won't feel badly about Roscoe's having been asked to resign."

Don said that he was afraid she would not understand that Roscoe really had most of the class behind him and that his downfall had been accomplished by some of the boys whose opinions weren't very important anyway. "But Roscoe

will be the one who will have to tell her about it, and he won't be likely to make that clear."

"Sally, let's go out there and explain how it was to Mrs. Lawhead," suggested Mardee. "I'd like to go anyway and thank her for her kindness to us."

"I think it would be fine if you girls would do that," said Branch, and added in an aside to Mardee, "Mardee Ant gives good measure when she makes up for Mardee Grasshopper's slights, doesn't she?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Branch?" asked Sally, but Branch only laughed mischievously, and as Don had begun to say something else, Sally failed to pursue the subject in her interest in Roscoe's affairs.

She and Begorry and Mardee went to see Marilyn before they went home and told her all about the impeachment proceedings.

"I wish I could go with you out to see Mrs. Lawhead," Marilyn sighed. "I should like to do something to show her how grateful I am for all the trouble she went to for me."

"You will have a chance to do something for her when your ankle gets well," Mardee comforted her.

Mardee and Sally and Begorry chose Sunday to go out to the Lawheads', because that was the only day when they could count on finding the whole family at home. They sent word beforehand by Roscoe that they were coming and found all the children scrubbed within an inch of their lives and awaiting them in an agony of dread lest

they get a spot of dirt on their freshly starched clothes before the company arrived. Florry and Myrtle were dressed up in the cheap silk waists and silk stockings and French-heeled shoes that constituted their Sunday best, and Mrs. Lawhead, a strong contrast in her plain cotton dress and stout shoes, welcomed them cordially.

It was a pleasant sunshiny day and warm enough to sit out on the front steps of the cabin and admire the view of the river and the hills beyond. The cabin, not being as high as the cave on the other side of the trestle, did not command the same view of the city.

After a while the children scattered and the girls made an opportunity to tell Mrs. Lawhead the story of the cap rush and the ducking in the watering trough, of Roscoe's part in it and the impeachment proceedings.

"He told me the boys had asked him to resign," said his mother. Roscoe himself was not there. He had told the girls previously that he was invited to take dinner at Professor McKie's that day. "It didn't make so much difference to him as it might, if he had cared about holding office in the first place. But Roscoe ain't got much time fer such."

Mardee answered as spokesman for the other girls. "Of course he hasn't. That's why he didn't take any part in the ducking. And that's why we felt it was so unjust to demand his resignation."

"The reason he wouldn't let the boys duck Deaderick Broom was because he knew Deader-

ick couldn't afford to get his only suit of clothes wet. Roscoe would naturally understand that better than most of the boys. He wasn't doing it in play, as some of them maybe thought he was. He don't spend no time in play. He goes to school because he wants to git an education. Even at that, he wouldn't go unless I made him, I reckon."

"Why not?" asked Sally.

"Well, he sorter feels as if maybe 'tain't fair fer him to be spending the time goin' to school when he could make so much more if he worked regular."

"But he'll make so much more in the end if he has an education!" protested Mardee.

"Of course he will. I want that he should git an education because it will give him so much better chance in life, but he would work and support the family if I didn't make him see that we are all glad to help him git some schoolin' fer our sakes, as well as fer his'n. He can do a heap more fer us in the end if he can work with his head instead of his hands. And that's why he goes to high school while Florry and Myrtle work in the medicine factory."

"Then they can go to school later when Roscoe is earning enough to help support them," suggested Begorry hopefully.

The mother sighed.

"I wish they could go to school now. It may be too late to do any good if they ever can. I never had no schoolin' but I lived back on the mountain among the mountain people. Florry

and Myrtle work in the factory with girls that spend all their money fer silk stockings and clothes that won't wash and picture shows and ice cream. I wisht they could git acquainted with girls like you-all and come to care whether they ever knew anything or not." She shook her head. "But they've got to earn somethin'. There ain't any help fer it. I can't feed eight mouths, and the medicine factory job's as good as any other."

Mardee and Sally and Begorry came away feeling more liking and respect for Mrs. Lawhead than ever.

"I wish we could do something to help them," said Mardee.

"They're not the kind of people who would accept charity," objected Sally.

"I didn't mean that," answered Mardee. "She seemed to think that Florry and Myrtle would be better off with some friends like our crowd. I wish we could do something for the girls." The thought stuck in the back of her mind, where it germinated like a seed and finally took root.

Meanwhile politics were again rife in the high school, and this time the girls were mixed up in them. The big event of the winter term was always the Senior party. There was no fixed date for it nor any custom governing the nature of the entertainment, and this year there were two factions in the class, one desiring to give a Valentine party and the other in favor of a costume dance on Washington's Birthday. Mardee, of

course, had no voice in the matter, but she was interested because Tom Adair had long since invited her to go with him whenever they had it, and she hoped it would be on Washington's Birthday because she was eager to powder her hair and wear Colonial costume.

"And if you do have a dance, Tom, have it in the Armory so we can dance on that perfectly dandy floor again," she urged.

"The Armory is the best place," Tom agreed. "The Senior party is such a whopping big affair that by the time every boy has asked a girl and every girl has asked a boy we have no room large enough for it in the high school — if we give a dance. Of course, if it is a stunt party and we can use the whole building, there is room enough, and there are a good many who want to give a stunt party. But I am not going to quit lobbying until I get enough votes to carry the dance — and I believe the majority is really in favor of a dance. It is so much classier."

The matter was hotly contested by the adherents of both opinions, and as February approached the noon hour was given to lengthy and vigorous discussions. As all the girls ate their lunches in the gymnasium during the winter when it was necessary to stay indoors, the Freshman and Middle-class girls were as familiar as the Senior girls with all the arguments pro and con, and most of them sided with one party or the other.

During January Lutie Kent, the Senior girl who had taken charge of Mardee on the night of

the reception to the new students, started a movement to buy a piano for the school. Lutie was the sort of girl who always seeks to keep in the limelight, and she was usually successful in her efforts. There was already a piano in the ground-floor study hall which was used to accompany the hymns during chapel exercises, but Lutie claimed that another was needed downstairs in the gymnasium to play for the marches and calisthenic drills.

She pointed out that "if we had one we could dance at the noon hour when we had finished eating", and she assured the girls that Miss Hazelhurst was very anxious for them to buy it. Miss Hazelhurst combined the duties of assistant to the principal and physical director of the girls.

"If every girl in the school will pay an equal share of the cost, we can buy a good piano without having to contribute very much apiece," she said, and carried around a petition to be signed by every girl who wanted the piano.

When she brought the paper to Mardee, Mardee said, "I don't want the piano especially, Lutie, but if everybody else seems to want it, I am willing to pay my share."

"All right. Put your name down, then, so I'll know I can count on you," said Lutie.

Mardee signed her name, and so did the rest of the S-B-double-M's, but that afternoon when they compared notes they found that every one of them had put her name on Lutie's petition for the same reason.

"I suppose most of the girls in the school felt the same way," said Sally. "We don't really need another piano. As far as dancing is concerned, we could dance to the music of a phonograph just as well, and we could buy a second-hand phonograph for little or nothing."

"Let's try to find out how many of the girls put their names down for the same reason we did," suggested Mardee.

"Nobody would like to do that all alone, but if we S-B-double-M's start a movement together, I believe we can get a list nearly as long as Lutie's." Marilyn was the author of this view. She was back in school again by that time.

The S-B-double-M's were the ringleaders in the opposition which developed the next day. They carried a paper around to be signed by those girls who were not in favor of buying a piano but had put their names on Lutie's list to keep from seeming disagreeable, and as Marilyn had prophesied, the list represented a majority of the girls in the school.

Lutie was indignant with their interference.

"All these girls ought to have expressed themselves in the first place," she averred. "Miss Hazelhurst wants this piano, and your signatures on my petition amount to a promise to pay."

"If Miss Hazelhurst regards them in that way, of course we will stick to our bargain," said Sally, "but I am going to have a first-hand understanding with Miss Hazelhurst about it," and off she marched to the principal's office.

"Come on, Mard," she called back over her shoulder, and Mardee accompanied her to hold up her hands, so to speak.

Miss Hazelhurst was very young and very pretty and very jolly and still enough of a girl in her point of view to be a great favorite with the students of both sexes. She understood Sally's and Mardee's contention immediately and assured them that the piano was not a pet project of hers.

In reply to Sally's suggestion of a second-hand phonograph she exclaimed, "Why, I shall be glad to lend the school a phonograph! And then everybody can dance. Nobody will have to play the piano."

And so the subject of a piano was dropped, but Lutie Kent, having failed to win a coveted eminence, looked upon Mardee and Sally Cox as officious meddlers.

Lutie was strongly in favor of having the Senior party on St. Valentine's day, and held forth, as was her wont, with dictatorial insistence in season and out.

"I am in favor of letting Miss Hazelhurst decide it," said one of the other Seniors at the lunch hour one day. "She has always been a good friend to the Senior class and we are counting on her to help us give the party. I, for one, am willing to abide by her decision."

"You might send Sally Cox and Mardee Gray to talk it over with Miss Hazelhurst. They seem to have influence in that quarter," suggested Lutie spitefully.

The matter was settled, however, at a called meeting of the class, and to Mardee's satisfaction the majority was in favor of a Martha Washington Ball at the Armory.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLAY

February held another red-letter day besides Washington's Birthday for Mardee. Early in February Miss Rhinebeck presented her play. It was a take-off on Shakespeare brought up to the minute. There were four characters: Juliet settled down and married to Romeo, Lady Macbeth leading a humdrum everyday life, Portia as plain Mrs. Bassanio, and Ophelia after several years of marriage to Hamlet. All were typical modern women with the identities of their famous prototypes, and the action took place at a summer hotel where they were supposed to have met.

Marilyn was Portia, and Mardee was Ophelia and called her husband "Ham." She was one of those foolish, trusting little wives who talk about their husbands all the time and have no opinions except such as they have gleaned from their smarter spouses. She was forever quoting Hamlet and began nearly every remark with "Ham sa-ays —" in a slow drawl.

The performance was at night, in the lower study hall, which was admirably adapted to the purpose, and Miss Rhinebeck and her whole English division had devoted themselves to making the mechanical part of the production a success.

Enough chairs and tables and rugs and curtains and potted plants had been offered to furnish a real hotel and the effect of those accepted was very lifelike and real.

"As for costumes," Miss Rhinebeck had said, "anything you choose to wear will do. Modern fashions for matron and maid are indistinguishable anyway. Wear summer dresses and hats you can use again off the stage."

"Oh, Mother, mayn't I get my spring hat early?" Mardee had begged. "I have to get a hat this summer, anyway, and with a new hat my organdie party dress can be freshened up enough to look quite well."

Mrs. Gray had consented and a day or two later she and Mardee spent the afternoon selecting a new bonnet. The spring fashions were especially lovely that season, for it was a flower year, and there was not a hat in the stores that Mardee could not put on and look well in with her fresh clear color and fluffy hair. Mrs. Gray enjoyed trying them on her as much as Mardee did herself, and the milliners welcomed a customer who could give their handiwork so effective a setting.

"She ought to have this hat," they would say. "It looks as if it were made for her."

"This hat was one of our favorites back in the workroom," said one saleswoman. "I don't bring it out when any homely old woman comes in who couldn't set it off. But isn't it sweet on the young lady?"

"I'd like to sell you that hat," said another,

"not only for the money, but because it gives me so much pleasure to look at you in it."

And Mardee smiled at her reflection in their mirrors and went from store to store, for when one can have but a single summer chapeau it behooves one to be certain that no prettier hat could be found. Finally she fell in love with a certain ravishing creation and knew that she had met her fate. It was pink — a luscious, soft, rosy pink — and the wide straw brim dropped down on either side of her face with exactly the droop of her soft, rosy lips and made a frame out of which her eyes softly smiled like two blue flowers. There were flowers on top,— blue, in a prim stiff row, as if some one had been very faithful with a watering pot in that garden.

"This is the one I want," she announced with certainty, caressing it with adoring fingers.

Mrs. Gray looked at the price mark. It was expensive,— far more expensive than she felt she could afford. But she set it on Mardee's head again, fluffed out the bobbed yellow hair underneath, did some rapid mental calculations regarding the possibilities of doing without a new waist herself, and nodded to the clerk, saying, "I'll take it."

"It will light up well in the play at night," she gave as her contribution to Mardee's rhapsodies. "We can put fresh pink ribbons on your organdie to make it match, and I think Mrs. Hamlet will look well enough for the wife of even her distinguished husband."

But the fates were kinder yet to Mrs. Hamlet.

On the day Mardee bought her hat Mrs. Gray had a card from Aunt Harriet postmarked Tampa and saying:

"We came here to spend a fortnight getting ready to go home. The shops are so perfectly lovely I couldn't resist purchasing some things for your girls, which I shall send by parcel post. Will stop over with you on our way north for a day or two if possible."

"I hope it will be something I can use in the play," said Mardee, but she had in mind something like a bit of embroidery or dainty accessory for the dress and was wholly unprepared for the good luck that was in store for her.

When the box came it contained two tailored linen dresses, a white one for Bab and a blue one for Mardee; Mardee's was exactly the blue of her eyes and the flowers on her hat, with more flowers embroidered on it in a prim stiff row all around the skirt and on the collar and cuffs.

"Oh, you lovely, lovely thing!" laughed Mardee from sheer rapture, pressing her cheek against the soft thick folds.

"It will just be the most wonderful help," sighed Mrs. Gray, gratefully reinstating her relinquished waist in her own spring clothes budget.

But when Mardee, dressed in the exquisite blue linen and pink hat, came down the narrow stairs from her bedroom the night of the play, slowly, setting each foot forth precisely as if calculating her effect, and glowing with color and sweet youth and the inner radiance of her excitement, Mrs. Gray's breath caught in her throat and her

eyes filled with the tears of a rapture deeper than Mardee's own.

The girls had rehearsed and rehearsed the play until Mardee felt as if there weren't any meaning left in her lines, and she confided to her mother and father and Bab, as they left home together for the high school, that she was so dreadfully excited and nervous she was afraid she couldn't remember them.

It was worse when she got to the building. There were two doors into the study hall, one on either side of the stage. One of them was in use as an entrance for the audience, and Mardee, coming in from the street, caught a glimpse of Don standing there taking tickets, and Branch and Ed acting as ushers and a great many people going in. The other was curtained off as a stage entrance, and the members of the cast, together with Miss Rhinebeck, waited in the principal's office across the hall for the time to begin. It was a miserable fifteen minutes to Mardee. She broke out in a cold perspiration, dreading the moment when she must walk out on the stage, and she pictured herself before the audience with her tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth, unable to say a word.

When her cue came, she felt as though her legs and feet were made of lead, but when she stepped out into the glare of the footlights, and the brightness so blinded her eyes that she could see no one in the audience but Tom Adair and Cliff Nash beaming at her from the dim illumination of the front row, and the whole big dark room

An usher came across from the door with a big bunch of pink roses. *Page* 213.

burst into a welcome of applause — all for her girlish beauty! — why, then her excitement turned into exhilaration. She could feel the color surge up into her cheeks. She did not feel like herself at all. It seemed as if somebody else were going to do the talking for her, and she was not a bit afraid.

She flung herself into the part with an abandon she had never felt at rehearsals. She began to see new meanings in her lines. She even found herself putting a lisp into her foolish little "Ham sa-ays—" she had not put there before. Every time she said it there was a ripple of laughter over the house and even the other girls on the stage were taken by surprise. She felt the atmosphere of appreciation and did it better and better. It was no credit to Mardee that her part was a funny one, but she did not miss any of its possibilities, and every time she opened her mouth it was a signal for the audience to laugh.

At the end the whole cast was called out before the curtain together, and each had a curtain call of her own. Marilyn had again given evidence of real histrionic talent. But the hit of the evening was Mardee. Her part, as it developed at the last moment, was the best vehicle for expression of the four, and her inner radiance of spirit had proved a magnet which drew the hearts of her audience. Her curtain call was the last of the four, and when she came out to the footlights it seemed that the clapping would never stop.

While she was bowing and smiling and backing off to one side an usher came across from the

door with a big bunch of pink roses and threw them up on the stage.

Here was a new problem! For a moment Mardee stood looking at them where they had fallen and wondering what on earth to do. And then a little voice within her whispered, "Act as you feel"; and she laughed aloud and ran and gathered them up in her arms and kissed them. No star of a dozen theatrical seasons could have done a prettier piece of acting, for it came spontaneously from her heart, and her audience clapped harder than ever and laughed with her.

After the play the friends of the girls who had taken part gathered around them to compliment and congratulate them.

Bab was the first one to reach Mardee's side.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Mardee. But a streak of genius in a family is likely to crop out almost anywhere," she said complacently.

Her mother whispered, "You did really well, dear," and her father repeated his favorite compliment of:

"Goodness me!
I never did see
Such a pretty girlee
As my Mardee!"

"Give me one of the roses from your bouquet to remind me always of how you looked when you ran and picked them up," begged Tom.

"Why didn't you tell us you could do it, you little actress?" demanded Cliff.

Sally declared, "You have found your vocation, Mard. You must go on the stage and gather in bouquets with pretty smiles."

"I'll always remember you as you looked to-night," whispered Marilyn, and Mardee replied with a squeeze of her hand:

"That's sweet of you, Marilyn. I never saw you look lovelier yourself."

Don proposed nine 'rahs for the cast, and again nine 'rahs for Mardee Gray, and as many of the boys and girls as could pressed around to add their felicitations.

Mardee, looking back, felt as if Mardee Ant had made her last stand in the week before the play. Mardee Ant had waxed strong during the quiet winter days of books and school affairs. To-night the new plaudits, the tributes, the praises, were music to Mardee Grasshopper's ears. They made Mardee Ant's tamer pleasures seem stale, flat, and unprofitable in comparison, and poor Mardee Ant seem a dull creature beside her more brilliant sister.

That night was a turning point in Mardee Grasshopper's career. Mardee had looked so lovely in the play that people began to comment on her beauty. Very often the reputation of being a beauty brings a woman more admiration than actual fairness of face, and Mardee began to notice from that time a tendency among her friends to accept her claims to homage as established. It was very intoxicating to find herself so admired. Adulation can get to be the breath of life and the need of it so compelling that the

distinction between appreciation and flattery becomes a matter of no moment. Mardee, however, was unconscious of this danger and basked happily in the sunshine of approval that suddenly burst upon her.

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

MARDEE went home from the play hugging the beautiful bouquet of pink roses but still too much excited to feel any curiosity as to their source.

Bab's inquiry, "Who sent the posies, Sis?" first reminded her that she did not know.

"There wasn't any card," she answered.

"Maybe there is one tied to the flowers somewhere," suggested Bab.

Mardee spread the stems apart, and there, sure enough, down inside the bunch was a little envelope addressed to "Mardee Gray, High School", and when she took out the enclosed card she read in Marilyn's handwriting:

"I hope you will do best of us all to-night. With love, Marilyn."

"Look, Mother and Dad," she said, holding it out for their inspection.

"That was a kind, generous act," said Mrs. Gray warmly. Her severe judgment of Marilyn made her all the better able to appreciate how the feeling must rankle in her ambitious heart that another girl looked prettier,— particularly a co-star in a theatrical performance.

"I think Marilyn has repaid me for running

back on the trestle to warn her," opined Mardee.

"Her act was fully as generous and probably cost considerably more effort," Doctor Gray agreed.

"I am going to see her the first thing in the morning and thank her for the flowers," said Mardee and went to sleep in a rosy mist of pink hats, blue dresses, footlights, hand-clapping, compliments, and flowers.

But to do her credit her dreams were not entirely selfish as she proved by her announcement the next morning at the breakfast table.

"I have a great scheme for killing two birds with one stone," she introduced the subject.

"Who are the birds?" asked Bab.

"I guess you'd say the birds were Marilyn and the Lawheads," laughed Mardee.

"That's a whole flock of birds! Surely you don't mean to kill them all?" teased her mother.

"What kind of a stone are you going to use?" Bab inquired.

Mardee sighed in pretended discouragement. "It isn't possible to make this foolish family understand anything without drawing a picture of it," she complained. "But, really, I have thought of a fine plan. Mother, do you remember that you said what Marilyn needed was an absorbing interest?"

Mrs. Gray replied that she did.

"Marilyn enjoyed rehearsing for the play. She isn't discontented and sarcastic when she is doing something that she likes, and she showed that she wasn't really selfish by sending me those

beautiful flowers and saying that she hoped I would do better than any one else in the play — when you know what the play meant to her. You said that she would not worry so much about what other people were thinking of her if she thought more about other people. She was grateful to me for what I did that day at the trestle and that is why she sent the flowers. And she is grateful to the Lawheads, too. I know she would like to do something for them, because she said so. And Mrs. Lawhead said that she wished her girls could go to school and could get acquainted with some girls like us. Now don't you see that it would be good for both Marilyn and the Lawheads if she could help those girls to study? I am going to ask Marilyn if she doesn't think we could go out there on Saturday afternoons and tutor Florry and Myrtle so they could be learning some lessons even if they are working in the factory. They have a half-holiday on Saturdays."

Doctor Gray, who had been nodding and smiling at his wife as if at some happy secret they had between them, beamed at her warmly.

"I am proud of you, Mardee," he commended her.

"That *is* a fine plan," her mother agreed with her.

"We could let them have our old school books and we could assign lessons they could be studying through the week. Do you think it would really work out?" she appealed to them eagerly.

"It will if Florry and Myrtle want to do it and if you girls have enough perseverance to stick to it," replied her father.

"And you will let me do it, then?"

Mrs. Gray smiled, "Of course we will. We will help you all we can. I was just thinking that if you did nothing but read with them great works of literature it would be worth while."

"I wanted to try to teach them lessons in history and arithmetic and physiology and all the things they would study if they really went to school," urged Mardee in a tone of disappointment.

"Of course you may do that if you would rather," Mrs. Gray assented and Doctor Gray added thoughtfully:

"As their mother said, the association with people of different ideals will possibly make them more ambitious to learn — and ambition is all that is necessary. And the effort in their behalf can't fail to benefit you and Marilyn."

Marilyn received the idea with enthusiasm. As it was Saturday she and Mardee went out to see Florry and Myrtle about it that same day. They telephoned to Mr. Stone's store in the morning and asked Roscoe to let his sisters know that they were coming.

"It's a good thing you telephoned," said Roscoe. "They go to the movies every Saturday afternoon. But they would rather have you come to see them, I am sure."

"It will do 'em a sight more good to be studying here at home than running around to the

movies on Saturdays," declared Mrs. Lawhead, "and to have lessons to study at night will keep them out of mischief." Mrs. Lawhead was not at home on that first day, but when she heard about the plan she took this approving stand and gave it her hearty support.

The two girls expressed themselves as being in favor of it, too, partly from pleasure in the society of two other girls near their own age, and partly from the faint stirring of that ambition which was theirs by inheritance; so after that every Saturday afternoon found Marilyn and Mardee in the little mountain cabin hearing Florry's and Myrtle's recitations, correcting papers, and explaining the contents of textbooks left over from their grammar school days.

By the time the play was over, preparations were already well under way for the Martha Washington Ball. Lutie Kent was chairman of the committee on decorations and quite characteristically she had made such elaborate plans, with the reward in view of prominence for herself as chief decorator, that her co-workers were busy at the Armory for two weeks beforehand. But the effect she obtained was well worth the effort. Every guest gave a gasp of admiration at first sight of the big assembly room on the night of the party.

Mardee had the good fortune to obtain a private view the preceding week. Not on Lutie's invitation. Far from it! Lutie had never ceased to regard Mardee's share in the failure of her piano scheme as meddling, and considering the

fact that Lutie was sure to regard her presence in the ballroom during the progress of its embellishment as an intrusion, Mardee thought the circumstances which led to her being there a good joke on Lutie.

Miss Hazelhurst was helping the committee decorate. She had promised to go down to the Armory one day and discovered, just as she was leaving the high school building, that three dozen rolls of crêpe paper which had been ordered from a stationer's had been sent by mistake to the high school instead of to the Armory.

School was out and nearly everybody had left the building. The paper was piled up on the steps just inside the front door and she knew that Lutie and her committee were anxiously awaiting its arrival at the Armory. While she stood looking at it in helpless uncertainty, Mardee Gray happened to come down the steps. She had stayed in that afternoon to rewrite for Miss Rhinebeck a theme which she had lost on her way to school that morning.

"Mardee, are you going to be busy this afternoon? Are you in a hurry to get home?" appealed Miss Hazelhurst.

"Not at all," Mardee assured her.

"Well, would you mind helping me cart all this stuff down to the Armory?"

"Not a bit. I'd love to. Just let me run over to Schmitty's and telephone Mother what has become of me.

"I am just crazy to see Lutie's face when I come walking in with you, Miss Hazelhurst," she

laughed when she returned from the bakery and took up her share of the pile of rolls.

Miss Hazelhurst protested, "She can't mind!" but Mardee laughed, "You don't know Lutie!

"But I wouldn't miss going for anything," she added. "I am crazy to explore that curious old building and I have never before had a chance to go down there in the daytime."

She told Miss Hazelhurst Don's story of the skeleton enclosed between the two thicknesses of the double wall and of the spooky tour of investigation she and Don and Bab and Judie had made the night of the basketball game.

"I have often wondered why the old place had so many walled-up windows and useless passages. Some time I want to go through it myself," said Miss Hazelhurst.

"It has been added to and rebuilt until it is a regular crazy quilt of rooms, and if I can get anybody to go with me I am going to try and see what it is like to-day," declared Mardee.

When they reached the Armory a surprise greeted Mardee's eyes. Lutie had turned the big C. A. C. room on the top floor into a crêpe-paper tent of red, white, and blue. Starting from the center of the ceiling and radiating in every direction, twisted strips of red, white, and blue formed a canopy which completely hid the plaster over head, and the dirty walls were in the process of being covered by a multitude of similar strips from floor to ceiling.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed Mardee in the doorway. "What a lot of work!"

"Don't you think it's pretty?" asked one of the girls who was pinning the strips to the baseboard within hearing distance. The boys of the committee, on stepladders, were fastening them at the top.

"It's beautiful," Mardee responded. "It makes this place look entirely different. Lutie, I think you're a wonder to undertake anything so tremendous," she added, seeking out Lutie to offer her congratulations. "I hope you don't mind my coming in this afternoon. Miss Hazelhurst asked me to help her bring down some tissue paper that had been sent to the high school by mistake. I never saw anything so elaborate in my life."

"Just don't tell anybody what it's like," requested Lutie, mollified by Mardee's apology and enthusiastic praise. "I want it to surprise people on the night of the twenty-second."

"I won't," Mardee promised, and wandered off to inspect the curious features of the big room. Everybody was so busy that she did not like to ask any one to stop and explore the building with her, and she felt timid about doing it alone. But the assembly room itself offered peculiarities enough.

The floor at one end was on a higher level than at the other. Mardee wondered why this was so, and in idly speculating on the reason decided that most of the room must have been added at some time when a new wing was being built and that the higher part had formerly been a small room in the original building. There was a door open-

ing off this higher end that aroused her curiosity, and upon opening it she found that it led into a long, narrow closet.

"There isn't any earthly need of a closet like this in such a room," she thought. It was too small to hold much of anything and had neither shelves nor hooks. Mardee could only account for its existence by supposing that it had served a purpose in the old days before the rest of the room was built.

The door of the closet was nearer one end than the other, and it was so dark inside that she could not see the far end of the narrow passage. Still idly curious, she felt her way along the wall until she had gone as far as she could, and then her hand touched something which felt like the panels of a wooden door. She felt around for a knob and soon found one, but it would not open the door, which was evidently locked. She felt for a key but there was none. Then she ran her fingers along the edge of the door and presently she touched a bolt,— a plain old-fashioned bar with a knob to slide it. It was rusty and moved reluctantly but at last yielded with a jerk and the door swung inwards on its hinges, letting in a rush of cold outdoor air and the light of day.

Mardee stared before her in amazement. There was a narrow staircase leading between two blind walls to an outside opening below. The narrow closet had evidently been a hall in the old days and this probably a staircase against an outside wall. She went down the steps, and at

the bottom she stopped for a hearty laugh all by herself.

She was in the alley which she and Don and Bab and Judie had entered in such trepidation on the night of the High-School-C. A. C. basketball game.

"This is the very staircase we came up that night," she thought, "and that is the very door we were so afraid to try for fear there might be a skeleton on the other side. Little did we know how near we were to the room the game was to be played in! We had to go all around Robin Hood's barn to get back there by the front steps."

She went back up and rebolted the door. Lutie's committee were all still busy and so preoccupied with their own affairs that she did not stop them to ask if they had found the unexpected door in the closet. And as the next day at school the board of editors of the high school annual issued a set of questions which aroused a storm of interest and discussion, Mardee never happened to mention her discovery at the Armory to any one.

The questions when answered would amount to votes electing the most popular girl, the most popular boy, the best student, the best all-around athlete, and so forth, in the high school, the winners' names to be published in the annual. They were printed on slips of paper, with blank spaces for the answers, and were to be signed and returned to the editors of "The Crow's Foot", which was the name of the souvenir

book issued each year by the retiring Seniors.

There were thirty questions in all, but those which caused the most discussion besides the ones already mentioned were:

Who is the prettiest girl?
Who is the handsomest boy?
Who is the ugliest boy?
Who is the most attractive girl?
Who is the wittiest girl?
Who is the wittiest boy?
Who is the most popular teacher?
Who is the most unselfish girl?
Who is the "best fellow" among the boys?

Every one was comparing notes, offering arguments, and making conjectures as to the probable vote of the majority on each question, and until the great day of the Martha Washington Ball little else was talked of in the high school.

CHAPTER XIX

MANY A SLIP

Mardee was to have a new dress for the Martha Washington Ball. The white organdie had done duty as an evening dress all winter and this was to be the biggest party of the school year.

"Some of the girls are making Colonial costumes," she told her mother.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Mrs. Gray had advised. "We couldn't afford to spend much on a dress for only one occasion, and you will look better dressed in something nice that you can wear again than in a dress made of cheap material. You may wear my old-fashioned lace bertha and cameo brooch to give a Colonial air to your costume."

"You're a corking sport! I'd ever so much rather do that! The powder and patches and a strip of black velvet around my neck will be Colonial enough," Mardee had agreed, and the two had set about planning a new dress, the mother with as much zest as the daughter.

Mrs. Gray had an old piece of white crêpe de Chine put away in the "treasure drawer" in her chiffonier. It had been given to her for a present but did not contain enough yards to make a dress for herself.

"We'll use this," she said, unfolding the wrappings of blue tissue paper in which it had been put away, "and we'll get Miss Parthenia Schmedley to make it up."

"Miss Parthenia Schmedley!" breathed Mardee, clasping her hands in a gesture of exalted adoration. Miss Parthenia Schmedley was a "real dressmaker" and this would be the first frock of so much sophistication Mardee had ever owned.

Miss Parthenia, duly approached, took the crêpe de Chine and pulled it through her bony fingers looking slantwise at it through the pince-nez teetering on her long nose the while she held it up against Mardee's slim young person.

"Um-m-m," she soliloquized, "something simple and girlish — not too low — a little close-fitting bodice — such youthful lines — most of the trimming on the skirt — very frilly over the hips — a rose at the girdle — nothing more — ah!" This last was a sigh of satisfaction with her eyes half-closed, for Miss Parthenia, if she were skinny and ugly, was an artist. "I will have it for you by the twenty-second."

Mardee went for two fittings, the last one on the twenty-first. The dress was still far from completed but Miss Parthenia assured her she need feel no anxiety.

"I have been very busy, but I will send it to your house to-morrow," she promised.

"I don't feel as if I could possibly wait twenty-four whole hours more," sighed Mardee at the supper table that evening. "I wish to-morrow

were not Saturday. Another day wouldn't drag so."

But Saturday did not drag. The twenty-four hours passed so quickly — in fact, were crowded so full — that she wished there were more of them before the next night. For on the twenty-second Uncle Theodore and Aunt Harriet descended on them for the visit mentioned on Aunt Harriet's post card, bringing with them Judie, who, being just Mardee's age, of course could not be left at home when Mardee went to the dance.

There was the storeroom to be transformed into a room for the girls again — dresses to be hung on the nails on the storeroom walls — clothes to be laid away in the drawers of the old dresser — a fresh towel to be spread on its cracked marble top and toilet articles to be set out before its broken mirror. There was the front room to be swept and garnished in honor of the coming guests, and there was Judie to be provided with an escort for the dance.

It looked for a while as if Judie would remain unprovided for, and Mrs. Gray firmly insisted that if she were, Mardee must stay at home with her guest.

"And miss *the Martha Washington Ball?*" demanded Mardee in a crescendo of astonishment.

"Unless you can take her with you."

"But, Mother, they are putting on all sorts of dog, and it's to be a cotillion. There is just exactly an even number of boys and girls."

"Putting on what?" Mrs. Gray's tone was a horrified reproach.

"See Seldom Fed prick up his ears. He thought you meant he was invited," chimed in Bab. She and Seldom Fed were curled up together on the dining-room couch during this conversation.

Mardee had already held frantic converse over the 'phone with Tom Adair.

"Dad has had a telegram from my uncle in Florida," she informed him as soon as the message came, "and he and my aunt and cousin are coming to-day to visit us over Sunday. You remember my cousin, don't you? Now what on earth am I going to do about the party to-night?"

"Why, Friend Cousin will have to go, too. That's easy. I remember her. What's her name?" came from the other end of the line.

"Judie. Judie Renick. But I don't see that it is so easy. Whom will she go with? If it's to be a cotillion she can't go with you and me, and everybody has had a date for this dance for weeks. There won't be anybody left to take her."

"The dickens! That's so," exploded Tom. "Why can't your relatives give a fellow warning when they're coming to visit you?"

"I don't know. But they didn't. And they'll be here this afternoon and Mother says I can't go to the dance unless Judie goes, too."

"Something's got to be done about it, but what — "

Mardee faltered, "I could stay at home myself and you could take her — "

"Now see here, Mardee! Did I invite any-

body but you to go to the Senior party with me?"

"No, but — "

"Hold on! I have an idea! Perhaps Prince Stanley can take her. Prince was going to take Lutie Kent, but Lutie's father is dangerously ill and she's not going if he doesn't get better. It will give us an extra man if Lutie does have to drop out. I'll ask Prince."

"Oh, splendid! I knew you'd fix it. You see Prince, and I'll tell Judie she's to go with him — "

"Better not. I haven't seen him yet."

"Oh, Tom, I'm worried to death. Suppose he can't? But you'll surely be able to find somebody, won't you?"

"Oh, sure! We'll go to the party."

The visitors did not arrive until supper time, and when they did Uncle Theodore and Aunt Harriet were shown into a spotlessly empty guest chamber and Judie was escorted to the storeroom. When supper was over and it was time to dress for the dance Mardee had not yet heard from Tom, but she took no news for good news and supposed that he had found somebody to take Judie.

A real calamity had happened, however. The new dress had not come. Mardee had been too busy all day to inquire about it, and at supper time, when she tried to telephone Miss Parthenia, she could not get any answer.

"I'll just have to wear the old one," she sighed. She took it down off its nail in the storeroom and patted it into shape. She felt like lying down on the bed and boo-hooing, but there was Judie to be

pleasant to, and she was sensible enough to know that it would only get her eyes all red.

"I'll have a good time, anyway," she resolved, and took extra pains with her hair to make up for the dowdy old dress. She had planned to catch it up on top of her head in a net and powder it to give it a Colonial effect. But even her hair wouldn't look right. The powder made it white enough, but it persisted in clinging to her head and looking hard and flat. She put it up and took it down three times in the flickering light from the two candles on the old dresser top, and finally gave up in discouragement. She would have let it hang as usual, except that such a coiffure seemed entirely out of keeping with the velvet neck ribbon and court-plaster patches. And even the coquettish strip of black and the two patches on her face failed to fulfill Mardee's expectation and bring a sparkle to her eyes. Judie, be-powdered and a-flutter with excitement, was dressing beside her in a lovely evening dress,— one of her mother's purchases in Tampa. Mardee felt that her only comfort was that her cousin would be a credit to her.

Just as they had finished dressing the door-bell rang.

"That's Tom, I suppose," said Mardee.

She and Judie gathered up their wraps and slipper bags and went through the closet into Mrs. Gray's room and on downstairs.

"Why, it's Cliff!" cried Mardee in surprise, finding Cliff Nash standing waiting in the front hall. "Tom didn't tell me you were going to take

Judie. That's perfectly splendid. Cliff, you remember Judie, don't you? Miss Renick, Mr. Nash."

"I am afraid you'll say, 'This is so sudden'," giggled Judie, giving him her hand in her nervous staccato manner.

Cliff gulped and turned a questioning look on Mardee, but finding her occupied helping Judie with her coat, he rose nobly to the occasion and answered easily:

"It certainly is a delightful surprise."

"You and Judie need not wait for Tom," suggested Mardee. "He will surely be here in a minute and Judie already knows some of the girls down there."

They had hardly had time to get out of sight of the house before the doorbell rang again — furiously — and Tom dashed into the hall.

"I don't know what we're going to do, Mardee," he confided in a despairing whisper. "Prince Stanley can't take her. Lutie Kent's father got better" — this in a tone of disgust — "and I've seen nearly every boy in the Senior class but they all have dates."

"But I thought you sent Cliff!" exclaimed Mardee, in blank amazement. "She's gone with him."

"Cliff Nash?" Tom might never have heard of such a person.

"Yes — Cliff. He came in just a few minutes ago and I thought — "

"What had he done about Marilyn? Didn't he tell you?"

"He didn't have time," confessed Mardee ruefully. "I sent them off in such a hurry. I thought you had fixed it up for somebody else to take Marilyn because Cliff already knew Judie."

Suddenly, as the two stood looking at each other, the expression of perplexity on their faces melted to mirth and they both laughed until they cried.

"Well, we should worry," Tom slangily summed up the situation.

While they were standing there holding their sides, the doorbell rang a third time. Mardee opened the door and a negro girl outside handed her a box with the words:

"Miss 'Thenie Schmedley send dis."

"It's my dress! It's my dress!" Mardee fairly sang. "Tom, go into the parlor with the grown people while I put this on."

She slid open the double doors into the front room and presented Tom to her uncle and aunt, and then she raced upstairs on feet winged with joy. "Bab, come quick and help me!" she called out as she flew, and Bab and Seldom Fed tumbled over each other in a pell-mell dash in her wake.

With trembling fingers she lighted the candles in the storeroom. She dropped her old organdie dress in a crumpled heap about her feet and let Bab, who had already opened Miss Parthenia's box, pick it up off the floor. She scrambled into the new frock, a delectably alluring, softly clinging thing of beauty, and she and Bab in breathless haste hooked it up together. It was molded to her tender young form in curves that caught

the radiance of the candles with a silken shimmer, —flat in front, frilly on the sides, with the half-shy, half-knowing air that a young girl's dress ought to have.

"Oh, Bab, if you bark at me like the old woman's little dog I'll say, 'Lawk-a-mercy on me, it surely can't be I!' " She gazed with dancing eyes, not at Bab, as she spoke, but at her own image in the broken mirror between the flickering candles.

She made a grab at her hair net with both hands and let her powdered hair come tumbling down about her face.

"It looked horrid. I feel as if I could do it better now," she explained.

With deft quick touches she put it up again. A pull here and a pat there, a fluff on this side and a tuck on that, worked the miracle she had desired. It was no longer flat and hard, but an elusive mesh of lights and shadows, of misty hollows and beckoning curls. A bright flush of happiness had crept up into her cheeks and painted them with an art many an older beauty would have envied. She turned away from the mirror a ravishing belle of colonial days.

"Now I'll do," she announced. The whole process had not taken five minutes. "Isn't it *grand* the dress came, Bab?"

"Mardee, you look like a picture," declared Bab with unaccustomed effusiveness.

Doctor and Mrs. Gray and Uncle Theodore and Aunt Harriet greeted her appearance in the parlor with exclamations of pleasure.

"It is Mistress Martha Custis herself," were her mother's words, but the mist in her eyes told a story not hinted at in the laughing remark.

"Your ladyship!" exclaimed her father with a courtly bow.

"You look good enough to eat," declared Uncle Theodore.

Aunt Harriet, who was nearest her, put an arm around the slim waist in its smooth silken bodice and gave it a tight little squeeze.

"That was for all young girls," she smiled up at her niece, as if Mardee were the symbol of young girlhood itself.

At the door of the ballroom Mardee and Tom met Cliff.

"Cliff! Where is Marilyn?" asked Mardee in a tragic whisper.

"That is just what I came to your home to tell you but you wouldn't give me a chance. Her cold got worse and to-night she has a degree or two of fever and her mother wouldn't let her come out. She telephoned me just at supper time, and I went by to tell you my hard-luck story. I thought I'd come with you and Tom."

"And you didn't even know I had a guest?"

"Hadn't heard a word of it."

"I never thought of telephoning Cliff to-day," Tom put in. "It was all settled he was to bring Marilyn."

"But I didn't have to come alone, after all. And Judie's a regular fellow."

"Oh, Cliff, how peachy of you! So you really were glad to bring her?"

"It wouldn't make any difference if I weren't, would it?" teased Cliff.

"Not a bit," admitted Mardee with a laugh.

"Sure I was," Cliff reassured her, relenting. "She's there in the dressing room waiting for you. Go and get her so I can dance with her."

CHAPTER XX

THE MARTHA WASHINGTON BALL

There never was such a party. To Mardee it was Romance with a capital R and she was not Mardee Gray, but the Heroine of Romance watching herself with Mardee Gray's eyes.

She had stepped into the character of a belle of "ye olden tyme." All about her were other dames with powdered hair; the ballroom with its canopy of red, white, and blue was a fit setting for a rout General Washington might have attended; the raised end of the room had been transformed by means of a lattice-work partition and swinging Japanese lanterns into a dimly-lit garden where belles and beaux might sit between the dances on rustic benches and sip lemonade at little rustic tables; there was no one who had not a smile of admiration or a whispered compliment for the shining-eyed *ingenue* who off the stage was Mardee Gray.

"Mardee Gray, you're the sweetest looking thing I've ever seen!" said one girl.

"You look too beautiful to be human," declared another.

"That's a perfectly darling dress."

"Mardee, if you don't mind, I'm going to have a dress exactly like yours."

"I never saw you look so lovely."

"You are a dream, Mardee!"

Mardee's progress across the floor of the dance hall was a triumphal procession strewn with verbal bouquets.

Miss Hazelhurst had been to the theater to see "Monsieur Beaucaire" before she came to the ball and when she came in, Mardee, who happened to be near the door, inquired:

"How was the play, Miss Hazelhurst?"

"It was beautiful, my dear," she replied — "like you."

Miss Herrington — bluff, cross, outspoken Miss Herrington — was sitting in one of the chaperones' chairs in a line against the wall.

"Come here," she beckoned with her forefinger to Mardee halfway across the room.

Mardee came skipping and leaned over with her hands on Miss Herrington's knees.

"Do you know what you look like?" whispered the crotchety old maid, her snappy gray eyes all crinkled with a smile.

"No'm. What?" Mardee's voice, too, was a whisper.

"Like a great — big — Clothilde Soupert — rose!"

The boys were just as enthusiastic. It was enough to turn anybody's head. If poor little Mardee Ant had been able to survive the play, she would have received a knock-out blow the night of the Martha Washington Ball. Mardee Grasshopper was in her glory. As the Heroine of Romance she laughed and chattered to the other characters of the story. They were not the

ordinary Tom, Dick and Harry of every-day life, but they, too, were figures of Romance, and the evening was a succession of scenes in which she played a part.

There was the scene with the court beau at the top of the stairs in the hall. Not all the boys wore Colonial costume, but this one, by virtue of his silk knickerbockers and white stockings, had become a court beau. They had had a desperate quarrel because the Heroine of Romance wouldn't promise him but one dance, and afterwards she had run away from another partner to sit out on the steps with him.

COURT BEAU: I can't understand you to-night.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: It's the effect of the powder and patches.

COURT BEAU: It's deeper than that. You are not Mardee at all, but some beauty of olden time come to life again.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: I wasn't going to tell you.

COURT BEAU: But you couldn't fool me, because, don't you remember, I was a courtier of the same period in that other incarnation?

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: Of course I knew!

COURT BEAU: And I paid court to you then, so I must pay court to you now.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: You don't have to pay court to me now just because you did then.

COURT BEAU: Oh, yes, I do! In every incarnation I am your true knight. In our next one I shall still be paying court to you, just as I am in this one.

There was another scene, staged in the lantern-lighted garden, on a long low bench against the lattice fence, with a Gibson man in a dress suit.

GIBSON MAN: I had been warned of this.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: Warned of me?

GIBSON MAN: Of what a flirt you were.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: I shouldn't like a girl who didn't know how to flirt, should you?

GIBSON MAN: Not a bit.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: So you really wouldn't mind if I flirted with you, should you?

GIBSON MAN: I should mind very much.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: But you said you didn't like a girl who couldn't flirt.

GIBSON MAN: You can flirt. And I like you. But you mustn't flirt with me.

And another one in the same garden, this time at one of the little tables, with the soft light transforming a very ordinary high school boy of yesterday into an Adonis.

ADONIS: You are very cold, little Miss Mardee.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: Cold? Why, no! Cliff (turning to man at next table), do you think it is cold? No, neither do I. Not at all.

ADONIS: You know I didn't mean that. But you might have given me more dances.

HEROINE OF ROMANCE: But this is the eleventh, and you had the first and fifth. How many more did you want?

ADONIS: The second, and third, and fourth, and sixth, and seventh, and eighth, and twelfth, and thirteenth —

Oh, Mardee had such a good time that night!

Everything conspired to warm her heart and arouse within her a glow of satisfaction. Even Branch St. John, who, the sworn knight of Mardee Ant, was not usually a courtier in the train of Queen Mardee Grasshopper, sat out a long intermission with her between dances and sang praises of her efforts in behalf of the Lawhead girls.

"Say, it's great of you to give up your Saturdays and go out there to help Roscoe's sisters the way you are doing. There's not another girl I know who would do it. I always said you were different from other girls."

Mardee accepted this compliment seriously. Somehow Branch's compliments were different from the other boys'. They were seriously given and so sincere that not to accept them in the spirit in which they were given seemed silly and empty-headed.

"I am glad I can do something for the Lawheads, now that I know how fine they all are and appreciate the struggle Roscoe is having," she said. "Do you know, Branch, now that I understand better how Roscoe feels, it makes me so ashamed of the way I disappointed him that first night I met him at Miss Rhinebeck's party!"

"You said Mardee Ant would make up for Mardee Grasshopper's thoughtlessness, and you've certainly kept your promise. If you've done all this because of hurting Roscoe's feelings that night I'll say it was a good thing for Roscoe you hurt them. I could kick myself when I think of

the way I laid you out that night. You have more than kept your promise."

"I'm not doing any more than Marilyn is," Mardee reminded him.

"Well, you are the one that put it into Marilyn's head. You are 'different'," insisted Branch. "And then it doesn't matter so much to me whether Marilyn is or not. I am not Marilyn's belted knight."

Mardee parted from him aglow with generous feelings and high purpose. That was always the effect Branch St. John had upon her. He was in truth Mardee Ant's knight. But she had the very next dance with Tom Adair, and before they had fox-trotted halfway around the room she was answering his whispered flattery with the coquetry of Mardee Grasshopper.

"Mardee, you're the kitten's ears to-night."

"Oh, Tom, you're trying to kid me."

"Honest, I'll tell the world, you're the canary bird's teeth."

Sally added her note to the chorus of praise in characteristic style. "M, y a t b o t b to-night," she said mysteriously, when they happened to be sitting side by side in an intermission.

"What does all that mean?" asked the boy with Mardee.

"No telling. It just saves Sally's valuable time to use only the first letters in her words," Mardee explained. "The rest of us have to spend all our time figuring out what she means."

"I was just telling Mardee what she is to-night," averred Sally.

"She's the belle of the ball, all right, whatever you said besides," declared Mardee's partner.

"That's what t b o t b means," replied Sally.

Mardee did not forget to see to Judie's pleasure, but Judie was not a burden to her hostess. Her liveliness and eager, if somewhat shrill, enjoyment of new surroundings made her always the center of a delighted group.

Doctor Gray leniently forgot to come for them at half-past ten. He did not arrive until after eleven, and then Judie and Mardee lay awake half the rest of the night exchanging confidences and rehearsing the events of the wonderful Senior party. Mrs. Gray, with exactly that eventuality in mind, had put Bab on a cot in her own room.

Bab made an interested audience the next morning, before whom the whole story could be repeated. And the day being Sunday, there were twenty-five or thirty callers upon the three girls combined with whom the ball could be discussed and rediscussed until as a subject of conversation it was torn to tatters. Judie and Mardee received congratulations upon their social triumph of the night before until even their strong young appetites for compliments were satisfied and the flavor of the flattery somewhat dulled to their palates.

When the next morning Judie's mother and father departed on their way Ohioward, their daughter had to be torn lamenting from the arms of Channingsburg, and called out from the disappearing automobile that she would live only for the day when she might come back again.

Mardee laughed as she waved her hand and turned away feeling sorry for Judie because she wasn't Mardee.

The Martha Washington Ball served to emphasize the effect of the play upon the relations between Mardee Grasshopper and Mardee Ant. Mardee Grasshopper had acquired a taste for admiration and compliments and public favor. She enjoyed her position as a new constellation in the firmament of beauty so much that it overshadowed all of Mardee Ant's simpler enjoyments.

For she was a new star. It was not only the boys and girls who commented upon how pretty she was. Other mothers told Mrs. Gray that her daughter was developing into a lovely girl. Other fathers told Doctor Gray that his little girl was growing up to be a beauty. Strangers on the street turned to look a second time as she passed laughing and talking with her friends, her cheeks aglow, her eyes shining, her whole personality flashing with the joy of youth and health. Her popularity increased and her parents looked on with anxious eyes and dreaded lest her sweetness be utterly spoiled.

As for Mardee, she had no time any more to sit on one foot in the rocking chair by the dining-room stove with an orange and a volume of Dickens or Thackeray. She was much sought after for school-girl-and-boy frolics. On afternoons when she was at home she was more likely to be found out on the front steps with a group of four, five, or six other young folks, one of the boys "showing off" perhaps, and the others

hilariously applauding. She saw less of the S-B-double-M's than she had before, because they were all Freshman girls and Mardee's vogue had spread into the upper classes. She was still fond of them, but they were, except Marilyn, a little afraid of the belle she was getting to be, and if the truth must be told, they were associated in Mardee's mind with bygone, less glittering days, and the inconspicuous career of Mardee Ant. Mardee Ant she held in a sort of fond, pitying contempt. She and Marilyn continued to tutor the Lawhead girls, however. No engagement was ever allowed to interfere with the Saturday afternoon expedition to Crow's Nest Mountain.

And fortunately for Mardee Grasshopper the long studious days of winter counted for something. She had done her school work well and was thoroughly familiar with the subjects that came up for the winter term examinations in March. The time she had wasted during the last days of February and first of March was so little in proportion to the time she had improved that even a very careless preparation for the final questions on the term's work did not prevent her from coming through the examinations with flying colors.

Branch St. John and Roscoe Lawhead were still her close rivals, and all three got marks well up in the nineties, but Branch had been absent for two weeks in the middle of the term and the effect on his class grades showed in his averages, and Roscoe was having all he could do as the school work demanded greater concentration to keep up

with that and his clerking out of school hours. Mardee really had an advantage which she failed to make the most of.

She knew she had been neglecting her studies and felt decidedly uneasy about her standing on the teachers' books. Physics she had especially on her conscience, for that had always been her bugbear, and the day after the physics "exams" she was passing Professor McKie's door when he opened it and came out into the hall.

"Please, Professor McKie, what did I get in physics?" she burst out, oblivious of the presence of a crowd of students in the hall.

"Guess," smiled Professor McKie.

"I'm afraid to. Eighty-five?"

"Plus ten."

"Goody, goody!" squealed Mardee, and executed a little toe dance to the amusement of her audience.

"Got your rivals whipped, Miss Mardee?" asked a boy whom she knew only slightly.

"My rivals?" asked Mardee in pretended innocence.

"You needn't think I don't know a race when I see it," he retorted, and his words brought to Mardee a shock of surprise,— the Mardee Ant who had resolved so short a while before to win the Davis medal already seemed so far away and unreal.

CHAPTER XXI

SPRING

As the spring advanced Mardee Grasshopper grew stronger and stronger. Everything in earth and sky conspired against Mardee Ant. Just outside Mardee's bedroom window, so near that she could have touched it with her hand from the porch roof, waved the pointed tip of a young tulip poplar tree. It was yellow-green now and held high in a cup of leaves a tulip in full bloom. Every day the first thing Mardee saw when she opened her eyes in the morning was the nodding top of her flower-crowned neighbor against a blue, blue sky, and the breeze in its dancing leaves whispered:

"Shut up your books. Come and play with me."

It played hide-and-seek in her sash curtains, getting behind them to billow them out into the room and then retreating suddenly and letting them fall with a slap. And as if the invitation of the breeze were not enough, a fat-breasted robin had to come and perch on her pet poplar tree, arguing with her in a throaty contralto that the sunshine was warm and dew-moistened dust lay on the roadways under the trees.

"What does he say, Bab?" Mardee asked one

day as he sat earnestly gazing at them, his head on one side and his beady eyes fixed and severe.

"He says, 'Tweet, tweet'," answered unimaginative Bab, with a yawn.

Mardee denied it. "He does not. He says, 'Look out of this window if you dare. Mardee Ant, get up and shove your bed 'way, 'way back in the corner and cover your eyes, if you expect to get any studying done to-day.' "

All day the conspirators kept up their assaults on her resolution. Everywhere windows were open and the sound of voices and smell of warm earth came in from outside. The noisy back-yard hens kept up a busy cackling that told of golden warmth and sheltered nooks to be explored. And in school, when she tried to recite, a clatter and rush and honking in the street below claimed her attention through the open windows.

In the afternoons there was no time for study. Chattering bunches of boys and girls gathered on the sunny front steps as soon as school was over—bareheaded boys and girls in gay new dresses—and strolled home together slowly under the archways of new leaves that dappled the sidewalks with flickering light and shade and filtered the sunshine with a green magic.

She never came home alone. There were always from two or three to a half-dozen boys and girls with her, who sat down on the stone steps leading up to the yard or in the swing on the porch. Some days Mardee would be on another girl's front steps.

Sometimes one member of the crowd would sug-

gest an ice-cream soda and they would all stroll off again and take some corner drug store by storm. And sometimes an automobile already more or less filled with boys and girls would draw up at the curb and the whole crowd would pile in as best they could, sitting, standing, hanging on the running board, and go tearing through the city streets and out over the country roads, singing, shouting, laughing, carrying hubbub wherever they went, but usually evoking smiles and tender memories of springs when other hearts were young. These boys were only youngsters and had not cars of their own, but they were occasionally allowed to borrow their parents' cars, and a few of them, and of the girls, too, had cars practically at their disposal most of the time.

Doctor and Mrs. Gray would not let Mardee be on the street all the time nor go away from home every day, and she regarded it as a hardship that she was so much more strictly brought up than most of her friends, but even when she was at home there was some one with her so much of the time that not much was accomplished by her staying there.

In short, Mardee was on the way to becoming as nearly perfect a specimen of the genus grasshopper as exists.

Doctor Gray observed the transformation soberly.

"'Getting spring into your bones' doesn't account for the whole trouble," he said in answer to Mardee's self-defense. "If Mardee Ant were so dead to God's big outdoors that she didn't get

the spring into her bones, I'd like to shake her until those dry bones rattled. If Mardee Ant could not ask herself with all her heart and soul, 'And what is so rare as a day in June?' then she wouldn't be Mardee Ant."

He repeated the whole passage from *Sir Launfal* with a fervor and tenderness that held his little audience enthralled:

" 'And what is so rare as a day in June?
Then, if ever, come perfect days,
Then Heaven tries the earth if it be in tune,
And over it softly her warm ear lays;
Whether we look or whether we listen,
We hear life murmur, we see it glisten;
Every clod feels a stir of might,
An instinct within it that reaches and towers,
And, groping blindly above it for light,
Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers;
The flush of life may well be seen
Thrilling back over hills and valleys;
The cowslip startles in meadows green,
The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice,
And there's never a leaf nor a blade too mean
To be some happy creature's palace;
The little bird sits at his door in the sun,
Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,
And lets his illumined being o'errun —
With the deluge of summer it receives;
His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,
And the heart in her dumb breast flutters and sings;
He sings to the wide world and she to her nest —
In the nice ear of nature which song is the best?'

"Mardee Grasshopper doesn't *feel* that. Other things appeal to her — dresses, and parties, and

compliments. And pretty soon Mardee Grasshopper will lose the power to *feel* at all. She will just live on excitement as long as the sunshine lasts and then she will get to be a dry skeleton whose bones would rattle if you shook them."

All this was on one of the study nights. The little audience was made up of Bab and Mardee and Mrs. Gray gathered around the dining-room table. Mardee still studied her lessons by the evening lamp, but her thoughts, as her father had guessed, were preoccupied. The lesson was just a lesson. She had lost Mardee Ant's keen desire to explore new continents of the mind, and her attention was distracted by the sounds and smells from outdoors. These spring nights were as bad as the days. When the moonlight lay like a silver sheet on the bit of a lawn around the house, and the odor of honeysuckle and chinaberries was a magical perfume drugging the sense of duty, Mardee Grasshopper was little to be blamed if her thoughts were off listening for familiar voices and sounds of gaiety outside the realm of her books.

"Whoo — oo, oo-oo, oo-oo!" came a yodel from outside on one such night when she should have been immersed in algebra.

"There are the girls!" cried Mardee, the equation of x and y flying out of the window, so far as her scattered wits were concerned.

"Mar — dee — ee!" the call was repeated.

"Coming!" sang Mardee.

On the front steps she found Sally and Begorry.

"Oh, we've just had a peachy idea!" they greeted her, taking the words out of each other's

mouths. "Let's have a picnic Saturday — the S-B-double-M's act as hostesses and invite some of the other Freshmen girls and get Miss Hazelhurst to chaperone!"

"Oh, rippin'!" cried Mardee ecstatically.

"We're going around to see Gibs about it to-night. We can invite the others to-morrow at school."

"When can we arrange about the lunches — what each shall take, and all of that?" asked Mardee, for already it was Thursday.

"We can talk it over at recess and put them up to-morrow afternoon," replied Sally.

"Of course we S-B-double-M's will put up ours together," added Begorry.

"No — I'll tell you what," amended Mardee. "We'll all spend the night in our storeroom to-morrow night, and put up our lunches before we start Saturday morning."

Marilyn, when notified, was as enthusiastic as Mardee, and the plan to spend the night in Mardee's storeroom met with unanimous approval. Miss Hazelhurst and all the other Freshman girls invited eagerly accepted, too.

Friday night was a sort of a reunion to the S-B-double-M's, for though the little club had never ceased to consider itself an organization, circumstances had lately prevented the old intimacy between the four girls. Sally was at her wildest and rattled off initials at a rate which made it impossible for the others to translate half her remarks. Begorry was in true Irish form and talked in the broadest of brogues. And Marilyn

and Mardee added their giggles to the general commotion until Doctor Gray had to come to the closet door and demand order for the sake of some sleep for the household.

When at six o'clock Saturday morning the four awoke and looked out of the storeroom window the shadows lay long in the backyard and the dew was sparkling on the grass.

"Faith, and it's a foine lot of lazy-bones ye be!" scolded Begorry, dragging the pillows off the bed to belabor the others soundly. "How manny toimes must I till ye to git up and dr-r-riss and go to mar-r-rkit?"

The plan had included an early-morning trip to the market house to buy the supplies for the lunch.

The stores downtown at that hour were just opening up, and the city streets wore the cool look of early morning on what is going to be a hot day. The vegetables, freshly watered in the stalls in the market house, looked wet with dew, and the concrete walks, newly sprinkled with wet sawdust and swept, had a clean smell.

"I intend never to shop at any other hour of the day," declared Mardee, reveling in the freshness and coolness.

"Me nayther," Begorry agreed.

They bought bright red cherries and spring radishes and onions and tomatoes for sandwiches, and before it got hot they had packed their lunch boxes and met the rest of the party.

"I know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows," caroled Sally.

They had set out for a bank whereon, if not the

wild thyme, at any rate the sweetest of pink honeysuckle grew, filling the air with its spicy fragrance. Overhead the breezes whispered in the branches of the willows, and before them, murmuring past the stone piers of a bridge, lay the clear river, rippling and sparkling in the morning sunshine like a million diamonds. On either bank the trees hung over like fluffy rolls of green, casting cool shadows upon the surface of the water and placid green images deep into its heart. And beyond the river were the hills, the near ones green to match the water, the far ones blue to match the sky.

"I'll say this is as perfect as anything could be when you've an ant down your back and a lock of hair that won't stay out of your eyes unless you turn your back to the wind — and the view," said Sally. "The grass is green and the trees are green and the water's green and the hills are green. Everything I can see is green except my hair."

"And the general effect you produce is green, too, so it doesn't matter if the hair is a shade off," Begorry assured her.

Sally flung out a retaliatory arm and Begorry's hat, a little mouse-colored mushroom of soft felt, went rolling down, down, down, with a frantic train in pursuit, until it skipped lightly over a projecting root and landed upon the water.

"Brave firemen, save my child!" besought Begorry, beating her breast.

"It looks more like your kitten than your child," laughed Marilyn. "Kitty, kitty, kitty!" she called coaxingly, making passes with a long stick at the

little wet furry thing bobbing up and down on the river.

"'Rah, 'rah, 'rah,
See my hat,
Chic-a-lac-a, chic-a-lac-a,
Maltese cat!"

Mardee paraphrased one of the high school yells.

Sally sat on the bank and sang:

"My bonnet flies over the ocean,
My bonnet flies over the sea,"

in a mournful tenor while a half-dozen fishermen angled for the truant *chapeau,* and wrung her hands with such tragic earnestness over:

"Bring back!
Bring back!
Oh, bring back my bonnet to me — ee — ee!"

that the others laughed until they had to throw their arms around the trees to keep from slipping into the water.

When at last the little hat was captured on the end of a stick and Begorry had hung it up on a willow tree to dry, Sally changed her tune to:

"I'll hang my hat on a weeping willow tree."

"Oh, girls, look up here," called Miss Hazelhurst. She was standing at the top of the bluff with her arms full of azaleas. "There is laurel on the side of this cliff, and arbutus all over the ground, too," she told them.

"Isn't this the most heavenly spot?" demanded one voice.

"And the most perfect day?" asked another.

"It seems too good to be true," added some one else.

All morning they climbed up and down, gathering flowers. When the sun got so hot that their hair clung to their damp brows they took off their hats and lay down to look up at the sky through the interlacing branches of the trees, and swung out over the river on a grapevine swing.

"It acts like a fan," said Marilyn, throwing back her head to enjoy the breeze as she clung to the twisted ropes of vine.

They ate their lunch on the top of a bluff with the winding river stretching away between the hills on either side.

"Just imagine lunch inside of four walls again after this," sighed Miss Hazelhurst.

"The poor little ants and spiders will miss us," wailed Sally sympathetically.

"Just imagine ever leaving here at all," exclaimed Mardee, throwing her head back against a tree and stretching out her arms as if to embrace the beauty of the spring.

But when half-past two o'clock came Mardee and Marilyn put on their hats and bade the others good-by.

"It is time to go out to St. Elmo and hear Florry and Myrtle Lawhead say their lessons," Marilyn explained.

"Couldn't you let it go just this once?" tempted Miss Hazelhurst. "It's too bad to miss all this."

"You don't play hooky from us," laughed Mardee in reply.

But the walk to the car line was another joy on that day of flooding sunshine and twittering birds. They followed wandering cowpaths through daisy-starred pastures and unfamiliar streets between backyard gardens, and at the Lawheads' they sat on the porch overlooking the panorama of river and hills from the mountain side.

Marilyn had gained from these classes at the Lawheads' one of the finest lessons life can teach. She had learned the joy of service and received the reward of self-forgetfulness. The discovery that she might be of use to Florry and Myrtle had revealed to her vistas of similar chances to help on every side. The grateful friendliness with which her advances were met surprised her. It was such a pleasure to know that people were thinking kind thoughts about her deeds that she ceased to care so much as she had what they thought about her looks. And, of course, when she stopped giving thought to her complexion, other people did, too. It is funny what a pointing signpost self-consciousness is. When she had ceased to repel people with her sensitive sarcasm she made friends right and left.

In fact, the good work which Mardee had begun reacted with more benefit on Marilyn than on Mardee, for Marilyn was not assailed by Mardee's enemies. The incipient vanity that lurks in every girl's heart was not fed in her case as it was in Mardee's, and no glittering snare of popular favor

was laid for her feet as it was for Mardee's. And by an unjust sort of justice Marilyn got more credit for her acts of generosity than Mardee did for hers. Marilyn appeared to have less to gain by them. A girl who is popular suffers from the involuntary resentment in the heart of possible rivals. Other people subconsciously feel that she might have done her good deeds to gain favor, or from the effervescent overflow of her cup of happiness. A girl who is not such a favorite has not this secret envy to overcome. Her generous acts win a willing admiration.

Marilyn's new disinterestedness was the more conspicuous because it showed such a change of heart. Perhaps the fact that she was her fashionable mother's daughter made it seem the more remarkable. People commented upon it in her case as they might not have in any one else's, and her name was the one most frequently suggested in answer to "The Crow's Foot" editor's question, "Who is the most unselfish girl?"

When the annual came out, Marilyn had received the vote for the most unselfish. She was radiantly happy over it. It changed the face of the whole world for her, and Mardee was as happy for her as Marilyn was for herself.

"You were right, Mother," she rejoiced at home. "You said that all she needed was something to take her mind off herself. She has forgotten all about her thick skin, and she's a different girl!"

Mardee had her own reasons for congratulation over the result of the voting in "The Crow's

Foot." She was voted the prettiest girl in the high school, and the most popular. And while Mardee Ant might have been generous enough to be glad that a friend had reaped the reward of her own unselfishness, Mardee Grasshopper valued the distinctions she had won so much more highly that she did not care who got the vote for the most unselfish.

CHAPTER XXII

BASEBALL

The outstanding feature of the spring to all high school students was, of course, baseball. Spring and the baseball season are to schoolboys synonymous.

The boys practiced on the playground surrounding the school building, but they held their games at Columbia Park. Both Tom Adair and Cliff Nash were on the team. Cliff was the catcher and Tom had always played in the outfield, but he was ambitious to pitch and this year material for good pitchers was so scarce that Professor McKie, the coach, had tried him out in the pitcher's box at the practice games.

The really responsible position on the team was that of manager. It was held by Prince Stanley, who belonged to a little set which had taken Mardee in. Columbia Park had to be rented, and as the gate receipts were a matter of uncertainty until after the games were over, the manager had to furnish a guarantee that the rent would be paid.

"We ought to have a fund on hand to draw from," urged Prince, and Professor McKie supported him in his contention and gave it a formal presentation before the student body. This was his first year on the high school faculty, and as

coach and faculty supervisor of athletics he had arranged a more ambitious schedule of games than the high school had ever undertaken before.

"The uniforms and equipment ought to be provided for when the season opens," he pointed out, "and a certain amount of ready money is always necessary for trips when we go away from home to play. Can't you boys and girls think of some way for establishing a permanent athletic fund before another year?"

He made this appeal during the chapel exercises one morning early in the spring term, and later in the same week the presidents of the three classes called a joint meeting to discuss ways and means of financing athletics. Professor McKie attended to hold up Prince Stanley's hands, and a spirit of ardent enthusiasm pervaded the gathering.

A committee was appointed to solicit subscriptions for the current season and a plan was formed for raising an athletic fund by means of a June Jubilee. The June Jubilee was to be a sort of carnival held in the assembly room at the Armory the first day of June. The girls were to have booths and sell candy and flowers and pennants and ice-cream, and there were to be side shows in tents, a merry-go-round and sliding board, a circus performance in the afternoon, and a vaudeville show at night, all by high school talent. Tickets were to be sold for admission at the door and a separate sum charged for the side shows, the merry-go-round and slide, and the articles sold in the booths.

"And I'll tell you what will make us a lot of money," proposed Prince. Boys and girls had been popping up all over the room with such a wealth of suggestions for side shows and circus and vaudeville stunts that the harassed chairman had had all he could do to preserve order. "We can elect a queen of the June Jubilee. We can erect a throne on the stage at the Armory and let it be vacant in the afternoon and crown a queen to sit there, surrounded by maids of honor, during the evening performance. We can charge five cents a vote and crown the girl who has the most votes by six o'clock on June first. There won't be any expense but the cost of printing the votes, and if we can get that done right away we can sell votes for two months."

"Fine!"

"Bully for you!"

"I'll tell the world, old Prince has a head on his shoulders!"

"Hurrah for the queen of the June Jubilee!"

Prince's idea received a warm welcome, and in fact turned out to be the best money-making scheme suggested.

He had a number of coupons printed with a blank to hold the name of the queen, and these the committee in charge were very arduous in selling, but nobody had any idea at first of the scope the contest for queen was to assume.

Early in the season the boys and girls simply wrote on the vote they had bought the name of a random choice for queen and dropped the slip of paper into the box prepared to receive them

under the bulletin board in the lower hall. Every day the committee counted the votes and pinned to the bulletin board a list of the names voted for. Every popular girl in the high school received some votes, and many girls outside got a few. There were dozens of candidates. Each day added new names to the list.

But each day added a few more votes to the totals of a few girls who were general favorites. Mardee's name was on the list from the first and never a day went by that she did not pile up more votes. In the first list posted, of only a dozen or so names, Mardee Gray had six votes. The next day she had twenty, the next sixty-three, and so it went. After a while it became evident that the race was narrowing down to nine or ten candidates. A few stragglers were added to the list from time to time, but as interest centered in the progress of those who were farthest ahead the names of those having only a few votes were dropped from the list.

Meanwhile nickels began to pour into the coffers of the committee in charge of the queen contest, and the astute managers of the June Jubilee had their eyes opened to the possibilities of such an election. They went down into their pockets for three dollars' or five dollars' worth of votes to swell the total of one candidate with a loyal backing, whereupon the backers of the others saw that they were left in the rear, and the next day another candidate was boosted with the same beneficial effect upon the treasury.

But whoever was temporarily in the lead, Mar-

dee always made safe and steady gains. It was evident that there was a strong force determined to set her on the throne.

Before long it was Mardee Gray against the field. The knots of curious-minded about the bulletin board each morning asked each other:

"How has Mardee Gray come on since yesterday?"

"Has Miriam Howell kept up with her?"

"Is she ahead of Caro Thorne again?"

"Has Bertha May dropped out yet?"

Every few days some candidate who had fallen conspicuously behind was dropped from the list, but never Mardee. A few other names remained as steadily on the list and made as constant gains, but it was plain that the friends who had started Mardee's boom were using every means in their power to keep her in the forefront.

"The S-B-double-M's are going to elect you queen, Mardee," Marilyn told her. "We have pledged ourselves not to spend a nickel on ice-cream or candy or cinnamon buns or picture shows until the June Jubilee is over. We will save all our spending money to buy votes with."

"Branch St. John and Ed McKie and I have started a movement to make you the Freshman class candidate," said Don Willis.

"Some of the fellows are organizing a Mardee Gray club and I'm your self-appointed campaign manager," announced Tom Adair.

Mardee found it very exciting to be hailed as queen by half the people she met. To have some one swearing undying allegiance to her every day

or so was a new and agreeable experience, and the consciousness that all her friends were meeting together to sing her praises and make comparisons favorable to her with the rival candidates did not tend to correct any tendency she might have toward vanity. None of it was conducive to concentration on her studies, either. If any one had desired to develop Mardee Grasshopper's qualities at the expense of Mardee Ant's, he could not have chosen a better way.

The baseball games at Columbia Park were to Mardee a series of soirées and the grand stand a salon where she could receive the greetings of her loyal supporters. She hardly knew whether she liked baseball best for this, or for the game, or for the soft air and warm sunshine and buzzing crowds of excited boys and girls in pretty spring clothes.

The first important series of games was with Lakemont, the prep school Channingsburg High had defeated in football the preceding fall, and in the Lakemont games Tom Adair was given a chance to show what he could do as a pitcher. Tom pitched brilliantly at times, but inconsistently. He was excitable, and both Professor McKie and his team-mates feared that he might lose his head in a closely contested game. There were two other pitchers on the team who were regarded as steadier,—Jake Gettys and Mart Leary. In the three games with Lakemont Tom was to pitch on Thursday in the first game, Jake on Friday, and Mart on Saturday. And Thursday afternoon Tom did just exactly what every-

body feared he would do: he lost his head completely when a lucky strike put the visitors ahead and pitched so wildly that Professor McKie would have taken him out of the box and used one of his other men if he had not thought it better to keep them fresh for the two succeeding games.

The score at the finish was seven to one for Lakemont. Tom felt the disgrace of it keenly. He knew that the boys were laying their defeat at his door, and he avoided his friends. Mardee, watching him from the grand stand as the crowd began to disperse, saw him going off towards the gate alone.

"Poor Tom," she thought; "he needs a friend."

She borrowed a pencil from some one nearby and tearing the margin off a handbill lying on one of the seats, wrote on it:

"Come up in the grand stand. I want to see you. M. G."

She asked an urchin who had been selling peanuts and was passing by with his empty tray if he knew Tom Adair when he saw him.

"Huh-uh," replied the youngster, shaking his head.

"He was the pitcher. Do you think you could find the pitcher and give him this note?"

Her small messenger departed, inquired of a Lakemont player he met in the field "which guy was de pitcher", and handed the note to the pitcher of the wrong team. Mardee saw him pointing her out to a perfect stranger, apparently, and saw the Lakemont pitcher make his way toward the grand stand.

"Why, hello!" exclaimed the stranger, when he reached her side. "If it isn't my little football friend!"

"Philip Bolling!" gasped Mardee, in a tone which made him wonder why she had sent the note, for plainly she was as astonished as he. She explained the mistake to him, and as by that time Tom had disappeared, Philip begged to be allowed to join her party going back to town. He walked home from the car line with her.

"We sure put one over on you to-day," he bragged. "We got even with you for last fall."

"You are not even, yet. We have two more games to play," Mardee reminded him.

"Oh, pshaw! You have to win two to get the best two out of three and we only one. You can never do it in this world," he exulted. "Poor Channingsburg!" he commiserated her mischievously, shaking his head with pretended sorrow.

"Poor Lakemont!" echoed Mardee, equally sympathetic, and from that moment they maintained a pretense of feeling sorry for each other. Philip spent all his spare time at Mardee's house, and during the games, kept up a rapid fire of signals from the Lakemont players' bench to the grand stand. If a Lakemont player got a hit off the Channingsburg pitcher, Philip would hop up off his seat to hide his weeping eyes in a handkerchief where Mardee could see him and then peep out over the top with a teasing grin.

Or, "Poor Channingsburg!" he would say, his lips forming the words and his expression indicating sympathetic grief.

Mardee would shake her fist and make faces at him, and when Channingsburg High was winning she would weep in her turn and signal "Poor Lakemont!"

Channingsburg took the second game with a score of five to three. Jake Gettys pitched. Mart Leary was to pitch the third, but on Saturday morning he broke his arm cranking an automobile and there were only two pitchers left,— Tom Adair, who had lost the first game, and Jake Gettys, who could hardly be expected to pitch two days in succession. It began to look as if Lakemont would get even, after all.

Philip dropped in as soon as he heard the news to offer Mardee his sympathy.

"I don't suppose you will care to go out to the game at all this afternoon?" he teased.

"Indeed I will! I wouldn't miss a chance to say, 'I told you so', for anything," Mardee came back at him.

She went out to the game with the other S-B-double-M's and Begorry's mother.

Jake Gettys pitched the first four innings. In the first inning Lakemont scored one run, and Mardee saw Philip Bolling wipe an imaginary tear out of his eye and wink at her. But for the next two Jake managed to shut them out, and in the last half of the third Channingsburg scored two. The grand stand was on its feet, the cheer leaders were dancing like wild Indians, and the band — Ed McKie's aggregation — could hardly be heard above the rooting. Mardee, catching Philip Bolling's eye, buried her face in her hands.

But in the first half of the fourth, Jake pitched three balls before the umpire called one strike, and allowed Lakemont to fill up the bases and score a run for every hit. The visitors scored four in that one inning. It put them three ahead of the home team. It was plain that Jake's arm was giving out. He could be seen in earnest confab with Professor McKie when he returned to the players' bench, and then Tom Adair trotted out and began to warm up, throwing balls to one of the subs.

"Oh, goody! They're going to give Tom another chance!" exclaimed Mardee. She had not seen Tom since the day of his humiliation. "Let's give a yell for him to let him know we still feel confidence in him. Perhaps it will help him to play better."

The S-B-double-M's started a yell for Tom, and he turned with a smile that showed all his teeth and threw his cap into the air. The whole grand stand joined in to encourage him, and when he stepped into the box at the first of the next inning, his pitching showed that he was master of himself and intended to make up for his fiasco of Thursday. He pitched better than Jake had the day before; he pitched better than either Jake or Mart had ever pitched. In fact, he pitched a no-hit game.

But when the last inning came, the score still stood five to two in Lakemont's favor. Cliff was the first batter up. He knocked a single and landed on first amid wild applause from the grand stand. Prince Stanley followed and sacrificed

to put Cliff on second. The next three men made first and second and struck out, respectively, and Tom Adair followed on the batting list. He came up with the bases full and two men out,— and a final score of five to two against his team if he failed to do anything for them. Many a better man has lost his head in less disquieting circumstances. Pandemonium had already broken loose in the grand stand and when Cliff went to third and second and first bases were filled. The S-B-double-M's had left their seats and were standing down at the front, holding to the wire netting.

"We're for you, Tom. We know you can do it," called Mardee in sober earnest, as Tom got up and started to take his place.

"All right — thanks!" Tom flung back over his shoulder as he picked up a bat.

And he swung at the first ball Lakemont's pitcher sent him, hit it such a crack that it sounded as if the wood of his bat must have split, and sent it like a cannon ball straight over the head of the short stop, between left and center field, and over the fence for a home run.

The rooters fairly split their throats as one after another four men crossed the plate for Channingsburg.

"High School,
Rah! Rah!
High School,
Rah! Rah!
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Channingsburg! Channingsburg!
Rah! Rah! Rah!"

they called, and:

"Pitcher,
Rah! Rah!
Pitcher,
Rah! Rah!
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Tom Adair! Tom Adair!
Rah! Rah! Rah!"

"Tom's won his own game!" yelled the crowd, and the boys poured off the bleachers and lifted him on their shoulders. He struggled to get down but his laughing captors held him. As he passed the grand stand his head was almost on a level with Mardee.

"I am so glad, Tom!" she congratulated him.

"I never could have shown my face again if I hadn't done it," he answered. "You'd have lost your campaign manager, Queen Mardee."

As Mardee was leaving the park, Philip Bolling came up to shake hands and bid her good-by.

"I am going into mourning," he laughed. "But I expect to take off my crape in the fall. Look out for Lakemont in the football season!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE JUNE JUBILEE

Mardee continued to hold the premature title of queen of the June Jubilee among her friends and loyal adherents, and the voting continued to occupy a conspicuous place in the activities of the high school. In fact, it grew more exciting day by day, and there was always an eager crowd around the bulletin board where the results were now posted two or three times daily. Mardee's candidacy had received an invaluable aid in the support of the Freshman class as a unit under the enthusiastic leadership of Branch and Don, for the Freshman class was the largest in the school. Her position was still further strengthened by a generous sprinkling of upper-class supporters in the membership of Tom Adair's Mardee Gray Club. If it had not been for a certain Caro Thorne among her rivals, Mardee's supremacy would have been so easily assured as to take the interest out of the race.

But Prince Stanley, with an eye to business, had introduced into the running the daughter of Montague Thorne, the richest man in Channingsburg and a stockholder in almost every large enterprise in the city. Caro was a year or two older than

Mardee and a pupil at a fashionable private school patronized by a dozen or so of the wealthiest families. She had a large enough following to put her well in the lead and to keep those aspiring to elect any one else putting up money.

"See here, Prince," complained Tom, watching the returns go up on the bulletin board one morning, "Mardee has seven hundred and forty-seven votes, Bertha May has four hundred and sixty-three, and your friend Caro Thorne has seven hundred and thirty-one. To-morrow she may be ahead of Mardee, because the high school vote is divided and for every two that go to Mardee one goes to somebody else."

"Well, I should worry," answered Prince, with an indifferent shrug. "It is nothing to me who wins so long as the athletic fund continues to roll up this way. Why don't you combine forces on one high school candidate and give Caro a run for her money?"

"Atta boy!" ejaculated Tom, slapping his thigh.

It wasn't long before Mardee was the candidate, not of the Freshman class alone, but of the whole high school.

"The harder we can make it for old man Thorne to elect his daughter, the more money we will make for athletics," was the argument by which Tom had converted the lukewarm. "It looks like Caro's bunch of rich relatives mean to buy her what she wants, and Mardee is the strongest candidate we can coalesce on, because she already has the Freshman class and the Mardee Gray Club behind her."

What Tom had said about Caro's rich relatives was true. They were always willing to buy enough votes to keep Caro abreast with Mardee, and Mardee's ardent backers carried the warfare into the downtown stores and offices of their own friends and relatives, ostensibly in the interest of high school athletics.

They succeeded in stirring up so much interest in the election that the *Channingsburg Times* posted the standing of the candidates every day on its bulletin board downtown, and after that Mardee felt that defeat was impossible to contemplate.

"Oh, Marilyn," she shuddered, "think how humiliating it would be not to be elected now, when failure would be so public! And Caro must feel the same way!"

"You sha'n't be beaten," promised Marilyn reassuringly. "Tom and Cliff and I talked it over and we persuaded Dad to give us fifty dollars' worth of votes to put away and surprise Caro's campaign managers with, at the last minute. Of course they will keep up until the end, but we'll spring these votes when it is too late for them to catch up."

"What a precious old darling Mr. Gibson is!" Mardee cried gratefully.

"He said he wouldn't have done it for athletics, but if it was to elect the pretty little girl who made such a hit with him at the houseparty on Crow's Nest Mountain, he'd be glad to give it," laughed Marilyn. "So you see you have yourself to thank, Mardee. And I really suspect," she added in a

confidential whisper, "that what happened on the trestle had something to do with it."

"With Mr. Gibson's fifty dollars' worth salted down to surprise 'em with at about quarter to six on June first, we have your election cinched, old lady," prophesied Tom jubilantly. Fifty dollars' worth meant a thousand votes. "All we have to do now is to keep even with Caro's crowd until the last minute and then walk in and grab the bacon."

Keeping even, however, strained every resource they could muster. The fund for athletics was growing by leaps and bounds. One day Caro's uncle, the owner of a spinning mill, would give ten dollars. The next day Mardee's henchmen would scratch around and collect enough votes to get a majority again. Then Caro's brother would fork up seven or eight dollars, and Don and Branch would carry their list into new fields. Thereupon Caro's campaign fund would be augmented by some bank president who was her mother's cousin, and the members of the Mardee Gray Club would resolve to go without something else and save the money to further their cause.

"I sold my bicycle and went without a new Sunday hat for you, Mardee," Don confessed rather pathetically.

"No girl ever did have such friends as I have," replied Mardee gratefully.

"Mardee Gray 1208, Caro Thorne 1224," the *Times* bulletin announced on May 28th.

"Mardee's behind. Thank goodness for our nest egg," breathed the S-B-double-M's.

"Mardee Gray 1256, Caro Thorne 1242," was the report on May 29th.

"Hooray! Mardee's ahead again!" cried a knot of her supporters.

"Mardee Gray 1302, Caro Thorne 1290," said the bulletin on May 30th.

"Two days to go and Mardee well in the lead," rejoiced the members of the Mardee Gray Club.

"Mardee Gray 1357, Caro Thorne 1307," was put up on May 31st.

"Yip! Yip! We've got it cinched!" yelled Tom, throwing his cap in the air.

"Everybody in town knows about the race," thought Mardee to herself. To tell the "honest truth", Mardee Grasshopper's vain little heart was thrilled by that prominence. But — "I'll simply die if I get beaten after all this." The secret of Tom's fifty-dollar nest egg was a comforting thought to her. Even if Caro's promoters succeeded in getting ahead now, their rivals congratulated themselves that they had a bomb to explode which would undermine the enemy's defenses.

On the day of the June Jubilee, Mardee was a waitress in the ice-cream booth. This was the largest of the booths; it was, in fact, a corner of the room railed off where girls in white aprons and caps served their patrons at small tables. The big room of the Armory was still decorated with the twisted strips of red, white, and blue that Lutie Kent and her committee had put up for the Martha Washington Ball. The paper lattice-work

partition before the raised end had been partially removed to make a stage for the vaudeville show of the evening, only the outer portions of it having been retained to conceal the dressing rooms curtained off for the performers. In the middle of the stage at the back was a platform topped with a throne gayly draped in red, white, and blue bunting.

The whole scene was a gay one. The booths were decorated with flowers and ribbons and pennants, the merry-go-round and sliding board, borrowed from a grammar school playground, were centers of hilarious throngs, and the tents containing the side shows were bedecked with streamers and topknots and supplied with spielers advertising the attractions housed therein — a two-headed girl, the tallest man on earth, the fattest woman, and a wonderful calf whose tail was where his head ought to be — this last because he was tied with his back to a pail of milk.

The circus, which took place between the tents and booths, was a three-ring affair, and posters hung about the walls set forth the accomplishments of the roller skating artists, the bicycle stars, the "family" of trick athletes, and the black-face comedian who would take part in the evening's program.

Mardee pictured herself crowned with flowers on the throne and surrounded by the S-B-double-M's, whom she had planned to choose for her maids, whenever her eyes fell on the stage beyond the lattice partitions. The voting was still going on, and the crowd at the Jubilee was buying a good

many more for Mardee than for Caro, because it was so largely a high school crowd.

Tom whispered to her in passing, "We'll hardly need that fifty dollars' worth now, we're so far ahead. We'll just put them in to swell the fund and give you a good majority."

As six o'clock approached Mardee's heart was in her throat. There was to be an hour's intermission between the afternoon and evening performances, when the participants could go home for supper. The polls were to close at the end of the afternoon so the votes could be counted before the doors opened again. She could see the tension in the expression of the boys keeping the ballot box, and feel the excitement of the vote sellers circulating through the audience of the circus. Her tongue was dry and her hands felt clammy with perspiration. She tried to appear casual and unconcerned, but as a matter of fact her head ached so badly that before six o'clock she could stand it no longer and went home early for supper.

She had just finished the meal and was sitting on the front porch in the cool shade of the vines, when Tom Adair and Branch St. John and Don Willis came down the street from the car line. A sorrier looking bunch she had never seen. She knew as soon as they came in sight what their news was.

Mardee felt so sorry for them she forgot that their trouble was disappointment for her sake, and running to meet them at the porch steps, she held out her hands and cried:

"Oh, I am so sorry, boys! I wish I could have won for you."

"You little peach!" responded Tom, wringing both her hands. "We are kicking ourselves that we didn't win for you!"

Branch apologized, "We were working against more serious odds than we knew, but we did our best. I didn't have much, but I gave what I had, and whoever is queen to-night, you are always our queen."

"I couldn't buy a thousand votes for you, Mardee," bemoaned Don, "but I would have stolen them, honest Injun, if I could!"

That made Mardee laugh and helped her over the beginning.

It seemed by the boys' account that Caro had finished nearly a thousand votes ahead.

"They had a hundred dollars of Mr. Thorne's money put away for the last. When we found our fifty wasn't enough we went down into our pockets and added twenty more, but that was the best we could do," they said.

"And we thought we had better come and tell you," finished Branch, "so you could stay at home if you would rather."

"I think it was just dear of you to do it," Mardee thanked them, "but I don't feel that way at all. I haven't done anything to be ashamed of and I am not going to stay away to-night. I am glad you came and told me, though, because now I won't have to worry about what to wear."

"That's the spirit!" Don commended her heartily.

"You're a dead game sport!" declared Tom.

Mardee parted from them so gayly that the three went away with relief in their faces.

She went down to the Armory with her mother and father and Bab in Doctor Gray's car. They were not too sympathetic, but sought to take the whole matter as play and her defeat as a part of the game. Only Seldom Fed, seeming to catch some hint of his mistress's mood, sat down dolefully close to the wall and thumped his tail on the floor, his ears dragged down in the mournfullest fashion.

At the door to the Armory she came face to face with Caro getting out of a limousine with her maids of honor.

At first there was a shade of embarrassment on Caro's face, but it disappeared when Mardee held out her hand and said with the friendliest frankness:

"Caro, of course I wanted to be elected, but since I wasn't I am glad for you that you were."

"What a darling thing to say!" cried Caro and gave her an impulsive kiss.

Afterwards Mardee often thought of that moment with the reflection that the old saying is true about an ill wind. For out of that exchange grew one of the sweetest friendships of her whole life.

At the time, however, she whispered to her father, "There! I'm glad I've got that over."

"You said just the right thing, and in the sweetest way," Doctor Gray commended her.

"There's one more thing I dread," sighed Mar-

dee. "I have not thanked Marilyn's father yet for his fifty dollars' worth of votes, and I feel ashamed to face him now."

Her father patted her hand sympathetically.

"Never mind. You couldn't help what happened. Just say what you feel, and it will surely be all right."

But Mardee hesitated to approach Mr. Gibson when she saw him with Mrs.. Gibson and Rosemary, talking to a number of their friends, and it cost her more of an effort than any of the bystanders knew to hold out her hand to him before so many people and say with her winning smile:

"Mr. Gibson, I want to thank you. for buying all those votes for me."

"Look here, sweetheart," replied Mr. Gibson heartily, putting an arm around her and drawing her into the midst of the group, "you didn't tell me how many you needed. The thing I'm sorry about is that the girl I wanted for queen wasn't elected."

"We're all disappointed for you, Mardee," said Rosemary cordially, and Mrs. Gibson tactfully added:

"I just wish there could be two queens." Caro's mother belonged to the same fashionable set that she did, and she was always careful not to say anything that might hurt any one's feelings.

Mardee had plenty of consolation in her defeat. The S-B-double-M's all kissed her and whispered that she was their queen, anyway, and warm-hearted Begorry made a little wreath of daisies

from the flower booth and broke down really crying, when she put it on her head; Branch St. John stuck to her side with a mute loyalty which seemed to say, "I'm here if you need a friend." Roscoe Lawhead came up to bid her good night and said, "The only reason I came to-night was to see you crowned. If somebody else is to be queen I won't stay." Jake Gettys, who, as football captain for the coming year, crowned Caro, whispered to Mardee after the coronation, "I hope she'll never know how I hated it — my votes all went for you." Professor McKie told her, "You're a trump to accept defeat like this." And so many girls and boys flocked around the ice-cream booth to condole with her that she had more of a court than Caro.

But Mardee's heart was sore behind her brave smiles. She had seen Tom congratulating Caro and laughing and talking in the group that surrounded her,— gay, debonair Tom, who loved sunshine and happiness and was attracted by popularity and success as a bee to the flowers. And, after all, being the center of a crowd of consoling friends was not like really being the queen and sitting up on the throne at the back of the stage with a crown and scepter. When the lights were put out for the vaudeville show and everybody's eyes were turned towards the stage she had to swallow hard to keep from crying and she saw the scenes through a blur.

Before the evening was over Mardee had received far more enthusiastic plaudits from the crowd than Caro, but they belonged to Mardee

Ant and did not satisfy the cravings of poor little disappointed Mardee Grasshopper.

The roller skaters and bicyclists had done their stunts and made their bows. The family of father, mother, son, and daughter in pink tights who were in private life members of the high school baseball team had held each other at arm's length and stood on each other in pyramids. The negro minstrels had come on and taken their places in a semicircle. They were bandying their jokes from end man to end man, when somebody near the paper lattice partition struck a match to look at his watch and carelessly dropped it to the floor.

He thought it was extinguished, but it wasn't. It fell at the foot of one of the paper strips forming the lattice work. At any rate, that is in all probability what happened. It would take only a spark to ignite a thin strip of paper. The flimsy lattice work caught fire and the flames quickly ran up to the paper canopy covering the ceiling. Tongues of fire ran out along the strips overhead; they broke loose as they burned, and fell toward the floor, forming a curtain of fire that divided the audience from the stage and drove it back toward the entrance.

There was a rush for the door. Chairs scraped, women screamed, girls sobbed, men called hoarse directions. Mardee, in the ice-cream booth at the back of the room, sat petrified with horror at the predicament of the queen and her maids on the stage.

They were cut off from the rest of the room and

the flames were rapidly eating up the partition and threatening the canopy over their heads. All the girls were dressed in costumes of net that would catch from a spark as quickly as the tissue paper. They dared not run through the curtain of fire to the entrance and they knew of no escape from the rear. Professor McKie had had presence of mind enough at the first indication of danger to run to their side and seek to prevent them from losing their heads and dashing through the burning partition and under the shower of smoking bits of paper from the ceiling.

"Oh, why doesn't he take them out through the closet and down the stairs to the alley?" thought Mardee, wringing her hands in suspense.

Most of the boys were engaged in tearing down the strips of paper and trampling out the fire. Some of them were beating it out overhead with their hands. The older men in the audience were attempting to clear the room in orderly fashion and assist in putting out the fire. The calmest of the women were seeking to quiet the others and help in getting the crowd down the narrow stairs without confusion. Mrs. Gray and Bab had joined Mardee in her corner, which was still comparatively safe, and Doctor Gray was up in front, busy putting out the fire.

"The closet!" screamed Mardee over the noise and excitement. "Professor McKie! The closet! The door to the stairs!"

He did not hear her. Nobody seemed to know what she meant. Evidently she was the only person who had discovered the back stairs to the alley.

There was no time now to tell any one else about it and explain how to reach it.

There was nothing to do but to get to the stage somehow herself and show the girls the way. Mardee glanced up overhead. The strips were still burning and falling. The space between her and the burning partition cutting off the stage was filled with flakes of fire. It brought up in Mardee's busy brain the thought of a fiery snowstorm.

But the flames had already reached the canopy over the stage. When those strips began to burn and fall —

Mardee shuddered. She glanced from Caro's net dress to her own thin frock — the organdie party dress. Organdie would offer no more resistance to fire than net.

But something had to be done and she was the only one who could do it. Her eye fell on the thick canvas of the side-show tent beside her. She seized it in both hands and shook it violently. The insecure tent poles gave way and with a strong pull she managed to jerk the canvas free and throw it over her head.

"I have to show Professor McKie how to get those girls out," she said to her mother, and wrapped the tent canvas about her dress as she ran.

Straight through the burning area she dashed, dodging this way and that to avoid the falling strips.

"Come with me!" she demanded breathlessly of Caro and her maids of honor and Professor McKie. "Oh, quick! Quick!"

She opened the door to the closet and led the way through the dark, narrow passage to that other door fastened with the rusty lock.

"There's a stairway here leading to the ground outside," she explained, as she shot the protesting bolt and threw open the door.

"Thank God," she heard Professor McKie breathe in the dark closet behind her, as the fresh outdoor air rushed in and fanned their faces.

Down the narrow flight of stairs they felt their way to the alley below. Some of the girls sank on the bottom steps from weakness. Some leaned against the brick wall of the building.

"I never was so frightened in my life," declared Caro unsteadily.

"I hope I shall never be so frightened again," sighed another girl, holding her heart.

As soon as they had sufficiently recovered from the shock and strain, they went around the house to the front door. There was a crowd in the hall at the foot of the stairs and many people were hurrying up and down the stairways.

"Here they are! Here are Caro and her maids!" a voice called out, when Mardee and her party put in their appearance.

"Caro!" cried Mrs. Thorne hysterically, throwing her arms about her daughter's neck. "Some one go upstairs and tell her father she is safe!"

Other mothers and fathers and distracted relatives received the rest of the girls in very much the same way.

"How did you get out?" they inquired, when

other emotions had had time to make themselves felt through the first relief.

"Mardee Gray knew of a staircase leading down out of a closet behind the throne," explained Professor McKie. "She ran through the fire to reach us."

"In that dress?" demanded some incredulous mother, holding her recovered daughter close in her arms.

"She wrapped herself in a canvas tent. It took courage and quick thinking to do what she did," Professor McKie answered again.

People came up to seize her hand and thank her. Mardee, in the reaction from her distress and excitement, felt weak and confused. She could not understand what they said. There seemed to be an unending number of them. She wanted to cry.

"The fire is out," somebody announced, and the word was passed along down the stairs. The people went up again to get hats and wraps and possessions they had left behind in the rush. Mardee followed them, because she was too confused and weak to be able to think of anything else to do.

The fire had done very little damage. The paper, being thin, burned up quickly without setting anything else on fire, and there had been enough people fighting the flames to keep them under control.

The story of Mardee's brave deed had preceded her up the stairs, and all along the way she was passed from one enthusiastic friend to another, shaken hands with, congratulated, thanked,

praised, until she was hysterical with the combined effect of the plaudits and her earlier disappointment.

At the door to the assembly room she met her father. At sight of his dear familiar face, Mardee's feeling of tension gave way and she threw herself, sobbing, into his arms.

"There, there, dear. I know. Come with me. Mother is waiting. We had better go home." He soothed her and held her tight in a comforting embrace.

He smoothed the bowed head and patted the shaking shoulders and motioned eager helpers quietly away until Mardee felt better. After a while she looked up and said:

"I can go now. Take me home, Daddy."

Then with her father's arm around her waist, she went down the stairs and got into the automobile where Mrs. Gray was anxiously awaiting her with Bab.

CHAPTER XXIV

MARDEE GRASSHOPPER ANT

Mardee was a heroine, but she had wanted to be a queen. Her mother put her to bed and sat beside her, quietly stroking her hair until she had closed her eyes and seemed about to sleep. Then Mrs. Gray left her and Mardee was alone with her thoughts. Never in her more than fourteen years of life had she been with such unpleasant companions.

"You weren't good enough to win!" she accused herself scathingly. "You thought you were so pretty and popular that everybody would choose you for queen. It never entered your head that they might want somebody else more than you. You've been a vain, conceited, self-satisfied, unendurable prig!"

It was Mardee Grasshopper she was arraigning.

"This is what Mardee Grasshopper comes to. Mardee Ant could have gone peaceably along, enjoying her books and studies and school days and good friends and been happy to-night if you hadn't pushed her out of the way and insisted upon trying to be the most popular girl in the high school, and keeping up with so many acquaintances you couldn't enjoy your friends, and going to so many parties you didn't have time to study, and caring

so much about clothes you lost your love for books. And then, when you find you are not so popular as you thought you were, what have you left? Nothing! What do a lot of acquaintances amount to? Only your real friends care whether you are queen or not. What satisfaction is there in going to parties? They only make you want to go more, and when there are not any parties to go to you have nothing to fill your time with. And how does pride in pretty clothes help when you're disappointed and sick at heart? There is no sense in having more than just so many, and they wear out, and somebody else can always have others just as pretty."

She crawled out of bed and went to sit on the floor by the window, where she could look at the tip of her poplar tree silhouetted against the starry sky.

"And friends like Tom Adair will stay with you and laugh and play just so long as you are a belle and there is a gay crowd around you. But when somebody else is the most popular girl, then they help to make her more popular. That is the kind of friendship Mardee Grasshopper inspires.

"Of course, there are friends like Branch St. John who stick to you through thick and thin, but they are the kind of friends that Mardee Ant makes. Branch has always said he was Mardee Ant's knight. Mardee Grasshopper is just lucky to have some friends she didn't make for herself."

There by that window Mardee Ant and Mardee Grasshopper had a reckoning together.

Mardee Ant presented reminders of pleasant hours spent by the dining-room lamp on quiet evenings and in the rocking chair by the stove on cold afternoons, of happy days with old and tried friends like the S-B-double-M's, in the enjoyment of simple pleasures, of inner resources which were an insurance against loneliness and bitterness of heart. She arrayed them against Mardee Grasshopper's memories, now turned to ashes of Dead Sea fruit, and she asked for a judgment of the relative merits of the two. Mardee Grasshopper had nothing to offer in opposition,— that night. She had to admit that she had chased a will-o'-the-wisp, that in pursuing the glittering chance of becoming queen of the June Jubilee she had forgotten all about the more solid reward of the Davis medal, and that the failure of her hopes had brought her more pain than Mardee Ant could have incurred.

In the still hours of the night, with her poplar tree and the stars for witnesses, Mardee vowed to renounce Mardee Grasshopper and strive to become Mardee Ant. She went to sleep hating Mardee Grasshopper for the pass she had brought her to — defeated before all the world Mardee Grasshopper had cultivated — humiliated — disillusioned — bereft of compensations to fall back on.

In the morning things seemed brighter. Friends called her over the telephone to ask how she was feeling, to express their regret that she had not been elected queen, and to congratulate her in enthusiastic terms on the part she had played during the fire.

Caro was one of the first to telephone, and her words carried balm to her rival's sore heart.

"I'd ten thousand times rather have been you than me last night," she declared. "I deserved no credit for being queen of the June Jubilee, but you could not have been elected to fill the place you made for yourself in people's hearts. Nobody will ever forget what you did as long as you live."

Later in the morning she sent a big bunch of peonies with her own and her mother's cards.

Other people sent flowers, too. An enormous box of hot-house roses came to "the queen of the Mardee Gray Club", and Mardee repented of the injustice she had done Tom in her thoughts the night before. There was another offering of several dozen carnations with a note of sympathy signed by a long list of Freshmen names,— Don Willis's, Ed McKie's, Branch St. John's and Roscoe Lawhead's prominent among them. The S-B-double-M's names were on it, too, and they also sent a separate offering of roses to "the S-B-double-M Queen." So many friends had robbed their gardens to express condolence and congratulation that all Mrs. Gray's vases were filled, and she and Lighty and the girls had trouble finding enough pitchers and jars and bowls to hold the wealth of floral messengers.

"Lordy, Miss Mardee, honey," Lighty expressed herself, striking an admiring pose with lean brown hands on checked gingham hips, "folks is just sendin' flowers *down!* They sure does think a heap o' you."

The flowers, and the sympathy, and the honor to the heroine were all very pleasant in their way, but they were not the same as being chosen queen. Not for one single minute did she forget her disappointment, or forgive Mardee Grasshopper for having brought it on her.

The other three S-B-double-M's put in their appearance before the day was far along and exclaimed rapturously over the bower Mardee's house had become.

"I wend to have found you making dole out of measure," declared Sally, who seldom talked straight "United States", but couched her remarks in the language of the "Morte d'Arthur" when she was not using initials — or dog Latin or the deaf-and-dumb language — "but instead I see such manner of good cheer as all men should marvel at it!"

"Faith and bejabbers, if it isn't a rale Oirish wake!" was Begorry's cheerful opinion.

"That's what it is," laughed Mardee. "It's a wake. These are funeral flowers."

Funeral flowers! The phrase stuck in Mardee's mind.

"They are funeral flowers," she said soberly that night to the family gathered about the dining-room table for one of their cozy evenings. Lighty had departed with her pan, and Seldom Fed, with his nose on his forepaws, was engaging in some terrible dream battle that disturbed his slumbers with twitchings and whimpered grunts. "The funeral is Mardee Grasshopper's — horrid thing. I believe, after all, Mardee Ant is

the real me. At any rate I like her better — "

"Amen!" fervently from Bab.

"Honestly I do," continued Mardee, after the laugh that had interrupted her discourse. "Her pleasures are deeper and finer and can't be snatched away by chance, or by other people, as Mardee Grasshopper's can."

"I guess if you were Mardee Grasshopper I should love Mardee Grasshopper better, but if you're going to be Mardee Ant then I shall love Mardee Ant better," smiled Mrs. Gray comfortably, running her darning ball down into the toe of a long stocking and grasping it firmly.

"How about you, Dad?"

"I can tell you which one I hope you will choose, but I can't choose for you. The choice rests with you."

"Well, I have chosen. I don't want to be just a butterfly. I want to use my mind and do something worth while. And to show you that I mean to use my mind I am going to take that Davis medal. If I start in right now and study until the end of the term, I can make up what I have lost at school. Just watch little Mardee Ant in action!"

She reached for her books with vim and opened with a bang the first one she picked up.

"Listen to this," she laughed. "The first words my eyes fall on —

> " 'My mind to me a kingdom is,
> Such present joys therein I find,
> That it excels all other bliss
> That earth affords or grows by kind.'

"That's Mardee Ant. Now here's Mardee Grasshopper:

> " 'I see how plenty surfeits oft,
> And hasty climbers soon do fall;
> I see that those which are aloft
> Mishap doth threaten most of all.' "

There were only two weeks left before the end of the school year. Mardee knew she would have to put in every possible minute getting up the term's work if she expected to be as well prepared as Branch St. John and Roscoe Lawhead for the final examinations. She had not fallen behind in her class grades for three reasons. One was that the record she had made in the first two terms had established a reputation for her with the teachers, who took it for granted that she knew her lessons and gave her the benefit of every doubt. Another was that the habit of study she had acquired made it possible for her to grasp the contents of a lesson without giving much time to its preparation. And the other was that her thorough grounding in all her subjects had made it possible for her to guess often at the answers to questions asked her even when she did not know them. But she had done so little studying since February that she lacked a comprehensive idea of what she was to be examined on, and she began at the first of the term's work in every book, and made a review of each, page by page.

She had to decline a great many invitations and miss a great deal of fun.

"But I can have fun after I get the Davis medal," she comforted herself, and continued to smile and shake her head at the importunities of friends.

"It is awfully hard to say no," she confessed to Branch one day. From Don's porch next door he had seen her hard at work on a lesson in the hammock on her porch and had come over to find out why she had not gone on a certain picnic he knew she had been invited to attend. "I guess that is because there is so much of Mardee Grasshopper in me."

Branch, finding no chair handy, sat down on the floor at her feet and leaned his back against the railing.

"Mardee," he said thoughtfully, "that first night I was sorry you weren't elected queen of the June Jubilee. But the more I think about it, the more I feel that it was the best thing that could have happened. It opened your eyes to the difference between Mardee Grasshopper and Mardee Ant, didn't it? And you know I have always liked Mardee Ant better."

Tom Adair felt very differently.

He, too, came to sit on her porch one afternoon when she was busy studying. But for quite another reason. He was there to try to persuade her to put up her books and join a party that was going out to one of the pleasure parks to swim.

" 'All work and no play will make Mardee a dull girl,' " he paraphrased persuasively.

Mardee thought over his words after he had gone.

"Mardee Ant doesn't have to be a dull girl," she decided resolutely. "But she is going to earn her pleasures. Mardee Grasshopper found out that all play and no work is like a meal made up entirely of dessert. It is apt to cause indigestion."

As the day approached for examinations to begin she figuratively set her teeth. She was grimly determined not to be beaten again. The whole school was interested in the race for the medal. They watched the bulletin board for the Freshman grades and collected about it to comment when the results of an examination were posted.

"Mardee Gray is a neck ahead," some one announced when the Latin grades went up with 99 for Mardee, 97 for Branch St. John, and 96 for Roscoe Lawhead.

"The S-B-double-M's will give a moonlight picnic on the river bank in your honor if you win the Davis medal," said Marilyn Gibson.

"Really and truly?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Then get out your invitations and begin to make the sandwiches," Mardee advised, "for I mean to take the Davis medal."

The next day the English grades were posted and Mardee led with 100.

She never lost her advantage over her rivals. She got 100 in history; even in physics, her hated bugaboo, she made a grade of 98. She "won in a walk", to use the words of the high school.

One of the features of the program on commencement night was the presentation of the Davis

medal, and Mardee, dressed all in white, in a new organdie dress made by hand by her mother, stepped forth on the stage of the auditorium to receive the coveted box from the hands of the superintendent.

"We had better have 'Mardee Ant' engraved on the back of this," smiled her father, when she handed it to him to examine after they got home.

"Oh, Daddy, the S-B-double-M's are going to have their moonlight picnic next Wednesday night. I can hardly wait for the time to come!" she switched off the subject to inform him rapturously. "I am going to wear my blue linen dress, and I want a pair of new white shoes, please." Then she laughed at herself for the interruption. "I am afraid my middle name will always be Grasshopper, even if I am Mardee Ant," she apologized. "Mardee Grasshopper Ant — that's my name."

THE END

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